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Full Name of Author — Nom complet de l'auteur

DOREEN GREETA / WATT

Date of Birth — Date de naissance 15 MAY 1953	Country of Birth — Lieu de naissance CANADA

Permanent Address — Résidence fixe

248 GRANDIN VILLAGE
ST. ALBERT, ALBERTA
T8N 2J3

Title of Thesis — Titre de la thèse

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WILFRED WATSON'S PLAYS:
THE SEARCH FOR A NEW THEATRE FORM

by

(C)

DOREEN GREETA WATT

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SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH
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PERMANENT ADDRESS:
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T8N 2J3

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled WILFRED WATSON'S PLAYS: THE SEARCH FOR A NEW THEATRE FORM, submitted by DOREEN GREETA WATT in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

....
Supervisor

J. Ben Tarver

Norman Yates

Date Oct 6, 1983

mama Lolita

The blessed Beatles have got
into my honeycomb!
My eyes are full of moth holes!
I can see things in this play no
one has ever thought of before!
Instant happiness!

Wail for Two Pedestals
Act 3 Scene 2

To Margaret V. Watt,
who has a love of knowledge and learning
that is inspiring

ABSTRACT

To introduce the discussion of Wilfred Watson's plays, a general description of the avant-garde theatre of the sixties is provided, including both general philosophical concepts and specific theatre movements such as the Living Theatre and Happenings. Watson's theories about theatre are presented to contrast the theory behind these movements, which abandoned words in favour of sound, gesture, and spectacle. Watson attempted not to forsake the word but to re-shape its use in the theatre. The major part of the thesis is an analysis of how this theory, in addition to Watson's theories about technology and its effect on twentieth-century man, came to fruition. This analysis includes discussion of the thoughts of Marshall McLuhan and the Vorticist concept of Percy Wyndham Lewis, as well as Watson's own ideas and interpretations as put forth in his articles and interviews.

Watson's plays are put in their theatrical and historical context with a discussion of the growth and development of theatre in Edmonton in the 1960's. A history of the productions of Watson's plays follows, which is tied in with the history of the Yardbird Suite.

To tie in these theoretical and historical details, an analysis of selected plays by Watson completes the work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Wilfred Watson has very kindly given permission for my use of quotations from the unpublished manuscripts of Cockrow and the Gulls, O holy ghost, DIP YOUR FINGER IN THE BLOOD OF CANADA, and write, I LOVE YOU, Let's Murder Clytemnestra According to the Principles of Marshall McLuhan, and Chez Vous, Comfortable Pew, for which I am most grateful. As well, I would like to thank Dr. Watson for the letters, unpublished manuscripts, and interview time, which were a great help.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction and Discussion of Sixties' Theatre

Out of that eventful period we now call "The Sixties" came some of the most eccentric theatre ever to be experienced in the history of the stage. Such eccentric forms of expression were generated by a new way of seeing the world, and were born of a desire to experience more fully what it had to offer.

Progeny of a generation which had experienced two world wars, and which had spent the years between and after those wars in the single-minded effort to rebuild lives devastated by war's destruction, the "flower children" of the sixties benefited from that effort, and had the affluence and leisure time to simply enjoy and experience life without having to worry about how to sustain it. A new Romantic era dawned, its instigators full of the desire for freedom of expression, eager to expand their horizons by whatever means, and above all, anxious to pursue the freedom they demanded as their right.

The theatre gave voice to those cries for freedom, and provided a platform for that freedom of expression. At times it was chaotic and free-wheeling, at times moving and sensitive in its effort to give an honest and forthright interpretation of man in his predicament on this earth. People involved with the theatre--both spectators and actors alike--screamed, shouted, moaned, groaned, painted their bodies or exposed themselves, all in the name of art and freedom of expression.

Those who were not actively experiencing this strange phenomenon were trying to make sense of it. Others found it delightful and tried to emulate it as a way of becoming part of it. Still others wanted to understand it _and_ participate. Such a man was Wilfred Watson, a poet and Professor of English at the University of Alberta. During the sixties he wrote a number of plays in the spirit of avant-garde theatre. This is not to imply that he was an outsider looking in. He was not an academician scrutinizing a phenomenon and attempting to comprehend it by imitating it. His thoughts, as they became known through his plays, came from the same sources as the ideas of his fellow artists. His plays were a natural creative outpouring of ideas influenced by his time. His experience, as a human being and a scholar, gave him the objectivity to be an observer and a commentator, but his nature as an artist made him a participant in this phenomenon.

This paper attempts to study Watson's work from the aspect of his being a participant in sixties' theatre. It tries to answer the question, "what sort of influences and theatre conditions shaped a playwright's work during those strange times?"

Those influences, and the work they produce, prove to be fascinating and compelling. They are not the influences which shape the work of the theatre today, and that is why this study was undertaken. The influences, the plays, and the artistic theories will prove to be unique to that period, making it an important historical moment.

There is not an attempt to compare Watson's work with what was going on in New York or any other major centre where experiments in theatre were taking place at the same time he was writing plays. The intent is to compare his thinking, as expressed in his plays, to that of other sixties experimentalists and explorers. The product in Edmonton differs from the product in New York, but the spirit is the same, and it is the evolution of that spirit in one man's work which is being studied.

In addition, a history of the Yardbird Suite, where some of Wilfred Watson's plays were produced, is included. This history is documented by newspaper reports from the Edmonton Journal, mostly press releases which advertised and reviewed presentations at the Yardbird. It was a theatre whose goals were the exploration of innovative and new dramatic works. Most of the new works it attempted were Watson's, so their histories are closely linked. A skeletal history of theatre in Edmonton at that time is also included, putting the plays of Watson in their theatrical and historical context. Finally, some of his plays are studied in detail to discover how his ideas came to fruition.

Watson's plays are confusing and a tangle of words, but what the author says about them, or about art and literature and society in general, is a lucid commentary on the culture of those frantic sixties, an insightful observation of what kind of people we have become, how we perceive the world around us, and how the technological complexity of it affects us.

As a background to the work of Watson and the influences upon it, it is necessary to examine the general background to the sixties from a theatrical perspective. Watson's theories seem unique, but there was not a "world according to Watson." He did not function in a vacuum; his philosophy was not obscure and isolated. It was part of a trend. There was a rationale similar to Watson's pervading the theatre movement of the time. This is not meant to imply that Watson's work was entirely outside-influenced. He has always tried to remain an individual in his work, and would certainly contest the idea that his thoughts and creations were anything but entirely original. Theatre in the sixties was a platform for experimentation, confrontation, exploration and dissent. The artists who shared this platform shared the attitude of the sixties, an attitude of unrest which evolved into confrontation, rebellion, and finally greater self-awareness and freedom.

The discussion which follows describes the theatre macrocosm of the sixties. A microcosm of this larger picture existed in certain respects in Edmonton, particularly with the plays of Watson.

Margaret Croyden summarizes the 1960's theatre movement in her book, Lunatics, Lovers and Poets. Her introduction is particularly eloquent, describing the foundations from which Happenings, The Living Theatre, and the theatres of Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook grew. Her theories as to how and why the "contemporary experimental theatre" came into existence are of interest in relation to the work at Yardbird, and to Watson's plays.

First of all, Croyden maintains that the theatre of the sixties was essentially non-verbal. She says:

> To a generation bombarded with over-sell and over-kill jargon, the programmed rhetoric of synthetic technocrats and hypocritical politicians, small wonder that new theatre artists mistrusted talk and relied on the physical, rather than on the verbal response, on a felt, rather than on an intellectual experience.[1]

The rebellious youth of the sixties, she goes on to say, abandoned conventional methods of communication and turned to rely on "visceral responses" or "vibes" instead of the mistrusted word. They developed a non-verbal theatre, foresaking the word-bound, "literate theatre" for "ritual, celebration and religion."[2] In particular, they abandoned the conventional proscenium arch stage for a more open space, or a so-called "found" space--an area not built as a theatre, such as a barn, warehouse, or garage. And finally, the traditional passive relationship between actor and audience was replaced by an active one, the audience participating in the theatre event as more than spectators.

Croyden gives valid reasons for the social upheaval of this period. She observes that a system which had promised economic security and political integrity, only to deliver poverty and corruption, was not to be trusted. A system which preached brotherly love and peace, only to perpetrate racism and war, invited rebellion. Little wonder the youth of the sixties dropped out of this deceitful system and opted for lives of non-conformity and rebellion.

These attitudes of mistrust and scorn for conventional systems fed the theatre movement of the sixties, but Croyden goes on to give yet another reason for the revolution of the theatre. Perhaps it would be better to call it "evolution" from the way Croyden describes it:

> The electronic age, a formidable challenge to all sensibilities, posed problems that eventually were to affect form, perception, and consciousness. Marshall McLuhan, hailing the arrival of the global village, predicted that television would enlarge our horizons, change our lifestyles, and usher in a need for a cool, visual, non-literary, multi-dimensional experience. He predicted that TV sound and image would change our 'body perceptions,' advance non-verbal communication, create a revolution in education, discourage literature, change our dress, popularize new music, promulgate mass action and mass participation. In other words, advanced technology was to color all our reactions and future relationships. Conditions in the sixties had opened up an age for questioning, evaluating, and redefining. Why should the theatre remain outside this upheaval? It didn't.[3]

The significant element here, which Croyden emphasizes, is McLuhan's prediction that the global village would usher in "a need for a . . . non-literary . . . experience."

Directors, actors, designers, and technicians are required to create a "non-literary experience." The results of their effort are called, among other things, Happenings, "improvisations," "experiences," or "creations." The playwright is eclipsed in this type of theatre movement; his services as a translator of feeling and experience into words and story are overshadowed. In this type of theatre experience, spontaneous expression is all.

As shall be seen later, in Edmonton it was this playwright, Wilfred Watson, who became an interpreter of and spokesman for the McLuhan age. Watson maintains that he was trying to find the theatre's best form of expression, the one which most adequately reached out to a new age. The age was characterized by new media other than the simple printed word as in books, letters, and newspapers, and the simple spoken word of direct discourse. Watson was attempting to find an artistic form of expression which accommodated a society inundated with the media of radio, television, movies, telephone, telegraph, daily newspapers, photographs--it is an endless list.

Watson's is still a literate theatre, relying on poetry. The temptation then, is to abandon Croyden's theories, and the non-literary theatre of the sixties, as inconsequential to a discussion of what went on in Edmonton. However, a further review follows, because the influences she discusses are of consequence, while the end results may be different than those reached in Edmonton.

Another element Croyden considers a foundation of "contemporary experimental theatre" is romanticism. She says,

> . . . the philosophical and aesthetic origins of the non-literary experimentalists . . . arise from a world-view that finds its roots in romanticism. For the spirit of the Romantic movement--its literary and artistic style, its tempestuous mood and search for inner vision, its glorification of the individual, and its belief in intuition and imagination, rather than logic and reason--perhaps more than that of any other period, comes closest to defining our own times and our own theatrical innovators.[4]

Croyden says the Romantic aesthetic elevated "felt experience over a rationalistic approach to life."[5] In sixties' theatre this meant the senses had to be heightened in order to intensify this felt experience (this was the rationale used by some sixties' experimenters to explain the use of drugs). It is no wonder that Pierre Biner, tracing the history of the seminal artistic movement called The Living Theatre (discussed later in this chapter), goes back to Artaud to find its roots. He says that The Living Theatre tried to find a "language of the senses," following Artaud's dictum for the new theatre:

> The stage must not remain a place where texts are recited but be 'a concrete physical place which asks to be filled, and to be given its own concrete language to speak,' a language 'intended for the senses and independent of speech.'[6]

For The Living Theatre, and other experimental theatre groups, this meant a return to ritualized speech or the abandonment of speech altogether. Ritualized speech meant the use of chants and highly repetitive speech patterns. With the abandonment of speech came the use of electronic sound and music and the use of the human voice to make sounds but not words.

The Romantic spirit in the theatre Croyden describes was manifested in these unconventional forms of expression, in the spontaneity of improvisation, the "anything goes" attitude of Happenings, and the revolutionary (both political and artistic) nature of The Living Theatre.

The language of this new theatre was for the most part non-verbal, as Artaud predicted. But even Julian Beck, one of the founders of The Living Theatre, acknowledged that words, or poetry, are also capable of bringing an audience to a transcendental experience, to bringing an audience closer to their spiritual and sensual natures, and to a greater overall awareness. He seems to be describing Watson's poetry in an interview of 1961, when he says,

> '. . . only poetry or a language laden with symbols and far removed from our daily speech can take us beyond the ignorant present toward these realms [of the unconsciousness], to an understanding of the nature of all things.' 7

There was a place for poetry in this type of theatre, as long as it brought about a non-rational experience.

The neo-Romantic, non-verbal theatre of the sixties was epitomized by certain theatre movements based in New York. These included the Living Theatre, The Open Theatre, Environmental Theatre, and Happenings.

The Living Theatre, which was to be the prototype of sixties-style experimental theatre, and which therefore deserves considerable space here, was founded in 1946 by Judith Molina and Julian Beck. Their goals were to create a theatre experience that would enable the participants to transcend the ordinary realm of everyday life and, through poetry of the senses, effective use of unconventional production techniques, chanting, ritual, and spectacular effects, ascend to the plane of the unconscious. With a greater understanding of the nature of all things, the participant could enhance his everyday life.

Two of their early works, The Brig and The Connection, are life-like representations of actual situations, heightening their sordidness. The attempt in The Brig, for example, is to make the audience feel as uncomfortable as inmates of a real Marine prison. Just as the actors were in rehearsal, the audience was made to experience the atmosphere of a restrictive life, where every move is governed by a set of rules. The brig is to symbolize a world which is so dominated by greed and lust for power that it is doomed, unless man is to take action. Similarly, The Connection has the audience watching what they believe to be the making of a documentary film about real dope addicts.

The group became increasingly committed to revolution and anarchy, and eventually went into self-exile in Europe for failure to pay taxes and holding a demonstration against the Internal Revenue Service. They returned in 1968, after four years, and achieved success (if success can be measured by the controversy caused) with their productions of Mysteries, Antigone, Paradise Now, and Frankenstein. While The Brig and The Connection were scripted works, these later ones were much more improvisatory.

The Living Theatre used the changed relationship between audience and actor for confrontation, demanding an end to the audience's complacent attitude. Art and life were intertwined for the members of the Living Theatre. They advocated what has been called "pacifist anarchism." Theirs was a Theatre of Cruelty in which the audience was bombarded with light, sound, and the bizarre behavior of the actors, all as a means of forcing them to confront political and social issues. They used nudity and obscenities to express their freedom, inhibition, and non-conformity. The action in their plays was non-linear; it was "built on juxtaposed physical configurations made with the actors' own bodies."[8] They used constructivist techniques, ritual, and sound instead of words to create their effects. There were no texts or storyline, just a collage of sound and images used to make a statement about injustice, violence, inhumanity, or the wretched state of man's life on earth.

By 1970 they had returned to Europe, where they eventually disbanded.

Julian Beck's belief was that man had got so far out of touch with his natural, barbaric self, that in his frustration and repression, he had perpetrated acts of extreme savageness. His Living Theatre encouraged spontaneity and inhibition, all for the sake of putting man back in touch with the irrational animalistic aspects of his self. That, Beck believed, was the first step on the way to a more "civilized" civilization.

The Living Theatre took full advantage of the potential for human contact in the theatre, and made much use of improvisation, as did The Open Theatre, founded in 1963 by Peter Feldman and Joseph Chaikin. It also exploited the "live" nature of theatre and tried to use it to its best advantage, instead of making the theatre presentation an ersatz television program or film offering. There was a close relationship between playwright and the Open Theatre, as described by Oscar Brockett:

> Typically, the writer supplies an outline, scenes, situations or motifs; working from this base, the actors explore the possibilities through improvisations, metaphorical associations, and other techniques; the playwright then selects those results that seem most effective.[9]

Any dialogue or words as such, were supplied by the actors through improvisation. The playwright supplied a skeleton, ideas, scenes, and motifs, but no specific words or poetry.

The Open Theatre, like the Living, was a cooperative venture. The works, such as The Serpent and Terminal, were a collaboration between the actors and the director. The members of The Open Theatre met daily for gruelling training sessions, where development of the body, voice, and spirit were stressed. Their work emphasized the non-rational and the spontaneous. They rejected naturalism, the method style of acting, and used sound and gesture as a means to greater self-awareness on the part of the individual actor, while not necessarily as a means of telling a story or furthering a plot.

In the spirit of forsaking the verbal for the physical were Happenings and Environmental Theatre. The idea behind Happenings was to make the entire setting and the spectators part of the work of art. Brockett describes one of Allan Kaprow's works, 18 Happenings in 6 Parts:

> --the gallery was divided into three compartments and in each various things went on simultaneously while images were projected on a variety of surfaces, and music and sound effects provided a background. All those who attended became a part of the event as they carried out instructions passed out to them when they entered. 10

In fact, the environment and the spectator determined the course of the Happening. Without a flexible, changing environment and cooperative, imaginative participants, there was no Happening.

Richard Schechner's Environmental Theatre also made the spectator and the entire space part of the performance. Schechner's Performance Group, formed in 1968, presented works such as Dionysus in 69, in which ritual, "real events" (usually any gathering of a crowd), and written text were used to destroy the boundary between spectator and actor.

The difference between Happenings and Environmental Theatre is that one had its origins in the world of pictoral art, while the other was a theatrical movement. Happenings were meant to create living, changing works of art. Environmental Theatre created a dramatic theatre moment.

Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook must be included in any discussion of sixties theatre.

Grotowski's Polish Laboratory Theatre made theatre a religion. Its adherent, the actor, was diligently trained to "confront his individual suffering and express it through his body and voice alone."[11] In works such as Akropolis and The Constant Prince, the onus was on the actor to create all the effects. While there was no text as such, the works were based on myths and old masterpieces which were put in contemporary terms. In Akropolis, for example, the battle between Cain and Abel evolves into the extermination of Jews in Poland during World War II. The works were highly ritualistic and symbolic.

Peter Brook's work is an amalgam of all the types of sixties theatre described so far. He was committed to giving modern, relevant settings to classics and often his works resembled epics. Environment was significant in his productions, in which movement superceded text, and vocal calisthenics superceded the actual word. And like the other groups discussed here, his was an ensemble of well-trained, committed actors. Brook's theatre was an Artaudian Theatre of Cruelty where there was confrontation and challenge in his staging of Shakespeare, instead of anything precious or pretty.

In works such as King Lear, The Tempest, and A Midsummer Night's Dream, Shakespeare's words were used, but they were given new meaning and put in different contexts. The experiences and themes provided by Shakespeare were more important to Brook than the recitation of beautiful poetry. In his productions of Orghast I and II in Iran, he created an entirely new language. In it, the sound of the words became more important than the words themselves. The "theatres" for these were ancient religious sites and isolated mountainsides in Iran.

This discussion of sixties theatre activity is meant to show how some of the philosophical concepts already discussed were manifested in the theatre. The emphasis in all these productions was on what was felt, seen, and heard rather than what was intellectualized. This type of theatre relied on sensory experience, rather than the spoken word. In many cases, how the words were said, by way of chanting, shouting, screaming, distorting the words or singing them, was more important than the words themselves.

Another characteristic of sixties theatre was the commitment to ensemble. The Living Theatre, the Open Theatre, Schechner's Performance Group, Grotowski's Polish Laboratory Theatre, and any ensemble of Peter Brook's, resembled schools, where adherents lived together and worked on voice and body to become proficient at using their own resources as their only props. They did not rehearse plays; through exercise and improvisation they worked towards greater self-awareness, or exciting an audience to confrontation, or putting an ancient myth in terms of contemporary experience. Life and art were one for them. Actors no longer assumed new personalities. They sought an extension of themselves, or a new dimension to themselves. Their theatre was a medium of political statement and protest. There was no compromise; they were dedicated to making the theatre a tool for bringing audience and actor alike to an awareness of universal truths or a greater awareness of self.

The plays of Wilfred Watson are in some ways products of the same artistic climate Croyden describes. Watson was trying above all to find the best form of expression for the theatre. He was trying to bring it to life by removing pedantry and pragmatic forms of speech from it. In short, he was trying to invent a new language for the stage.

The productions of his plays assumed the characteristics of Happenings of Environmental Theatre. The entire theatre space, audience area and all, was used as the performing area. Light, sound and media were imaginatively used, but it was through words that Watson was trying to create a new experience for the audience, and to bring them to a greater awareness of the nature of being. Words were the tools with which Watson wanted to shape a more vital theatre. While his works were products of the neo-Romantic, non-verbal school of theatre practice, there are still other, more unique influences and trends to consider, which set his works apart from non-verbal theatre forms.

CHAPTER II

Technology and Form--The Watson Aesthetic

From certain of his critical essays and review articles, Watson's theories about art can be ascertained. Two names appear frequently: Marshall McLuhan and Percy Wyndham Lewis. Together with these two, Watson is interested in how the technological phenomena of the twentieth century affect man's perception of the world. The new technology requires a new way of coping with the world; this fascinates Watson, McLuhan, and Wyndham Lewis.

According to a letter he wrote to the Edmonton Journal in March, 1965, the Yardbird production of Wail for Two Pedestals by Wilfred Watson was refused an invitation to compete in the local competition of the Dominion Drama Festival. This incensed Watson, who wrote to the editor of the Edmonton Journal:

> It seems that there isn't room in the festival for the type of play which explores by means of new theatre forms contemporary modes of consciousness.[1]

Therein lies a much-needed clue to an understanding and appreciation of Watson's work. It explains the method he was trying to use in the contemporary art world: "new theatre forms"; through which he was exploring "contemporary modes of consciousness." Watson's association with Marshall McLuhan becomes apparent with this declaration, and it is an association which must be explored in order to understand Watson's works.

His interest in and understanding of McLuhan is noted as early as April of 1964, when he wrote a letter to the Journal editor in defense of McLuhan, in response to an article published earlier in the Journal. "I am afraid Professor Marshall McLuhan has been misreported," he wrote, "His point is that since the development of electronic devices of information processing, writing is in fact being abandoned by businesses and by institutions."[2]

McLuhan has been frequently misreported and misinterpreted. His theories are fascinating but perplexing, and this discussion of them does not claim to succeed where others have failed. However, as far as Watson's plays are concerned, some understanding of them is essential.

McLuhan wrote:

> . . . media, as extensions of our physical and nervous systems, constitute a world of biochemical interactions that must ever seek new equilibrium as new extensions occur.[3]

Essential to understanding McLuhan is the realization that he speaks of media as extensions of man's nervous system. He does not intend to discuss their content, but rather to discuss their form. When discussing print, for example, he does not talk about important books and how their contents changed man's thinking about certain subjects. Rather, he discusses the effect that the medium of printing had on man's perception, and especially on his collective unconscious.

Man, according to McLuhan, cannot be unaffected by a new medium. He cannot choose to ignore it, because it is a part of him, like an arm or a leg. If one grows a new arm, one cannot ignore it. It becomes a functioning part of one's everyday life. Similarly, one cannot assume that by not owning a television set and by consciously avoiding the watching of television, he can be immune to its effects. As long as he is a member of the society of which television is a part, he has "grown" the appendage called television.

Content aside, when we watch television we are made to piece dots on a screen together. This is a unique way of perceiving things, and this is the element which McLuhan says affects us. Television is a participatory medium insofar as we are made to piece together the parts of a mosaic in order to make sense of or even to "see" television. And thus:

> Pervaded by the mosaic TV image, the TV child encounters the world in a spirit antithetic to literacy. 4

Children who can piece together the mosaic image of television comprehend the world in a different way. No longer content to be one piece of one mosaic, they want to be joined to, and experience, all the pieces of the mosaic instantaneously and simultaneously. Thus, as they are "involved" in television, they are "involved" with the world.

The experience of television is one of "synesthesia," which McLuhan describes as "unified sense and imaginative life," and which he says "dislocates [people] from their usual attitudes of passivity and detachment" which they are able to maintain when they read, or listen to radio. Television may involve its participants (or viewers), "but it does not excite, agitate or arouse." Presumably, "this is a feature of all depth experience."[5]

Examples of McLuhan's discussion of television have been used here to describe his theory, because it is his treatment of television for which he became well known. But his book, Understanding Media, deals with all media. His thoughts on photography are particularly relevant to a discussion of Watson's themes and to sixties theatre, in that his discussion relates to the topic of the abandonment of the word in theatre.

Our electronic age is the age of instantaneous images. Reality is repeated in an instant--the length of time it takes to snap a picture. This reproduction leads to a uniformity and repetition of images, until we communicate through icons, or through clichéd language. That is, certain images have universal meaning, or are frequently repeated throughout a society. We make ourselves understood to each other by a language which has become codified. Certain oft-repeated phrases are understood by all. These are the means, so McLuhan believes, by which the advertising industry operates.

McLuhan was frustrated by our ignorance of what technology was doing to us: "The extreme bias and distortion of our sense-lives by our technology would seem to be a fact that we prefer to ignore in our daily lives."[6] He saw that it was changing our perception of the world, and was certainly shrinking our world to village proportions. But he also saw that it was having a profound effect on our very being, insofar as the media are extensions of our central nervous system. Man communicates differently than he used to. Words do not seem as important as images. Complex semantic structures have been discarded for instant pictures.

As well, our world is a mosaic which we are trying to piece together into one big picture. It has always been a mosaic, but prior to electronic technology, we did not possess the means to piece it together.

One of the first makers of Happenings, Allan Kaprow, was aware of this concept of technology changing our perception of things. He had a profound interest in it:

> . . . I'm interested in what happens after a person pays attention to the informational deluge. Does he go to the supermarket in the same way? What happens when his eye becomes a wide-angle lens that takes in the whole scene and not just the box of cornflakes?[7]

From this departure point Kaprow invented new forms of art which were constructed as parts of the natural environment (not just parts of displays in art galleries), and in which people could participate. With their new "wide-angle lens" they could see more, and experience more, and become involved with more.

During the Poet and Critic '69 Conference in Edmonton, an "anti-conference" was staged on the recommendation of Watson, who "felt the formal conference didn't sufficiently emphasize new writers and new ideas."[8] It was inspired by McLuhan's theories, according to a student, Ed Turner, who described it as "'a modern McLuhan thing . . . The analogy to it is a student doing homework, talking on the phone and watching TV all at the same time.'"[9] The audience was bombarded with stimuli. Folksingers and actor-dancers performed in the midst of "poetry in motion" (potters at wheels), a pair in bathing suits, three students in refrigerator cartons walking about, and a blank wall inviting graffiti.

What Kaprow was touting as an art form, Watson was commenting upon at this "Poet and Critic '69 Conference"--an academic conference on the arts.

Watson shared McLuhan's fascination for the way in which the twentieth century electronic society communicated, and saw that technology had evolved in them a new way of communicating and a new way of interpreting the world.

This fascination with the fact that "electronic devices" had become essential to man's communication, and that writing was becoming a clichéd form of communication, was to color all of Watson's plays.

Watson and McLuhan were commenting on the fact that ours is an age of instant communication, and an age in which we are bombarded by electronic images at an incredibly fast rate. There is in a sense "more history" and history is made faster than it was ever made before. An event of importance occurs, the entire world is immediately informed of it and in fact sees it happening over and over again via the electronic media, and those same media instantly record the event for posterity.

We are constantly being fed information, and our viewpoints and opinions are in a constant state of flux, swayed by new information being presented to us in a most convincing manner. The media have become a god, whose word is powerful and authoritative. Not only our opinions and our perception of things, but our very self-images are in a constant state of flux. We look to the images purveyed by those electronic devices to make the unconscious decision as to which personality we will assume.

But most important to Watson and McLuhan's thesis is the fact that we exist, thanks to the various media, in a state of "multi-consciousness."

At any one time we are being bombarded with an array of verbal and visual signals, telling us who we should be, where we ought to go next, how we ought to get there, and what we ought to buy when we arrive. From moment to moment we are capable of receiving and digesting that bombardment of signals, such that we are able to keep informed of a variety of facts, and to be exposed through electronic data to a number of worlds--social, economic, and cultural. Thus if we absorb this information to our advantage, we are capable of functioning in any one of a number of environments. The many worlds we view on television teach us a variety of values, a variety of speech patterns, and a variety of behavorial patterns.

And so, in an article published in 1966, Watson would claim that, as opposed to the "unified consciousness imposed by print," twentieth-century man enjoys "many modes of consciousness . . . ." The territorial lines imposed by the printed media have been crossed with the introduction of electronic media as means of communicating, informing and entertaining. Watson sees twentieth-century man enjoying a great freedom with the crossing of these lines, such a freedom that he (Watson) finds himself "wanting to celebrate in absurdist plays and in satirical verse." Satire, he explains, castigates the crossing of territorial lines while the theatre of the absurd celebrates the crossing of territorial lines. It also allows the use of unrealistic settings and "multi-environments."[10]

The concept of "multi-media man" is a fascinating one which warrants further study. It is essential to understanding what Watson was trying to achieve in his plays. It even helps to explain much of what twentieth-century art is about, particularly the various innovative theatre movements of the 1960's and early 1970's.

The twentieth-century multi-media man, according to Watson, has many worlds and many modes of awareness, which are not "unified by language, whether spoken, written or printed." As well, "no two men are likely to have the same mix of the multi-consciousness available" and so "Professor McLuhan has spoken of modern society as being without centres. Modern man has no centralized consciousness, he is off-centre, eccentric in a radical new way."[11] This phenomenon becomes "shattering" when all the members of a group are off-centre.

To make the concept of multi-consciousness clearer, Watson describes each consciousness, or each group that an individual can belong to, as a moving carton. Society consists of a collection of moving cartons, each one a different consciousness. A moving carton labelled "kitchen" would hold cups, saucers, plates, etc. In society, an individual might be encapsulated by the army "carton." This carton would contain an existence identified by speech which takes the form of barked-out orders, by physical activity, by being rigorous, and by day-to-day life being quite disciplined, even involving combat.

On the other hand, if an individual is encapsulated by the university carton, his speech is more eloquent, mental activity has precedence over physical activity, and day-to-day life includes much thought, the only "combat" taking the form of vigorous debate.

In his lifetime an individual can discard one carton for another in rapid succession, sometimes employing two or three cartons in the course of one day (family-work-play). A man uses a different kind of speech at home, at work, and at the squash court. He employs a multi-consciousness in order to thrive as a twentieth-century man. He soon learns that each aspect of his life simply involves entering one "carton" and then abandoning it for another, much as an actor assumes and discards roles.

Traditional values have been shattered and traditional symbols have lost their universal meanings. Modern man is civilized in all directions; multiple combinations of consciousness are possible, and "what is in, is personality made up of selective configurations of public modes of consciousness." With so many modes of consciousness to choose from, an infinite number of configurations is possible, and one individual may find his particular configuration incomprehensible to a fellow being; they are rendered incommunicative. As Watson notes, "broadcasting creates broadcasters not listeners."[12]

But Watson maintains that the artist could help solve the problems of multi-consciousness. The artist who writes with the multi-media man, that is, using the language of multi-consciousness, will create a universal language that all individuals can understand. In this way, he will be writing for the multi-media man by deciphering and making available to him the language of his fellow multi-media man, who may have a different configuration of modes of consciousness. This was the reason for the admiration Watson held for James Joyce and Percy Wyndham Lewis, and for the faith he had in Marshall McLuhan:

> Both Joyce and Wyndham Lewis understood that multi-media meant multi-consciousness, but neither knew how to relate themselves as artists to the audience of eccentrics growing up around them. . . . Perhaps the singular distinction of Marshall McLuhan is his seeming ability to write for, not merely with, the new eccentric. 13

In a retrospective article published after McLuhan's death in 1981, Watson pays tribute to McLuhan and describes as clearly as is possible the language McLuhan created for "the new eccentric":

> The McLuhan wordplay is first of all a vortex. It sucks in its vocabulary from the chaotic energic [sic] twisting the post-war period into imminent disaster. This vocabulary was used to discuss the chaos everywhere and to identify patterns by which it could be dealt with as a vortex. McLuhan became outstanding from his adoption of a vocabulary chosen for its relevance to the network of technologies and media he recognized as the vortices of power generating the technological unconscious of contemporary man. These vortices, he insisted, couldn't be analyzed in the linear arguments and formulations of discursive reasoning . . . [McLuhan's world] is almost the multi-conscious world of Percy Wyndham Lewis, where the central concept is the modification of the human mind, not only by motion pictures, radio, television or computer, but by all the technologies man invents to exteriorize his needs. 14

Watson connects McLuhan and Wyndham Lewis--an important connection. Watson's plays create a chaotic world, one where several disconnected things happen simultaneously. It is a reflection of the twentieth century world which McLuhan describes. Wyndham Lewis had already dealt with that world in the earlier part of the century, eventually formulating his theory of vorticism.

A vortex is an energy source, the great silent centre of something, around which ideas swirl in a great and constant motion. Like the hippies of the 1960's, who were trying to uproot the Establishment, "vorticists" were trying to unsettle Victorian England. Like hippies, they could see technology distancing man from his natural state and moving him closer to a soul-less, automaton-like way of existing.

Vorticism is a complex theory, and rather obscure. It was promulgated by an artistic movement of the early twentieth century, whose manifestos were composed by Wyndham Lewis. Its members included Ezra Pound and his artist allies who:

> admired the compressed power of the machine, its ability to perform its function with clean precision and without any messy emotionalism or fuss. They wanted to transfer those attributes to their own art, so that the essence of the machine age which surrounded them could be defined in pictorial and sculptural terms. 15

In the previously-quoted article about McLuhan, published in 1981, Watson links the ideas of McLuhan and Lewis. Lewis saw that the machine had already created a multi-conscious environment in Victorian England. Its complexity, an intricate system of cogs, wheels, and rollers, had brought about changes in Victorian modes of consciousness. Man no longer conceived of things in simple, linear terms. He could see things in a more convoluted and complex way, and could deal with more than one phenomenon at once. The vortex of Lewis's Victorian England was the machine, around which energy and ideas circulated. The vortex of McLuhan's age, says Watson, is technology.

Wyndham Lewis described his world using art and poetry--these creative outlets were the vocabulary he used to describe, or to bring others closer to, the vortex of his world.

Watson credits McLuhan with adopting a vocabulary which described the forces motivating modern man. The idiosyncracies of Watson's plays can be seen as an attempt to represent the whirlpool of energy (ideas and action) at the centre of which was the point of concentration, or the unconscious, of the 1960's. He had faith that an audience could cope with many unrelated things going on at once, and with various stimuli, because they coped with these things in everyday life.

Jane Farrington, writing about vorticism and Lewis, says that "Vorticism attempted to train people to understand and to appreciate the new external approach as opposed to the internal and, to Lewis, decadent view of art." She quotes Tarr, written by Lewis:

> 'Deadness is the first condition of art: the second is absence of soul, in the human and sentimental sense. With the statue its lines and masses are its soul, no restless inflammable ego is imagined for its interior: it has no inside: good art must have no inside.'[16]

All of this helps to explain so much of Watson's art, particularly his approach to characterization. His characters are soul-less, allegorical figures. Plots are nonexistent, just as vorticist art is never anecdotal. There is no sentiment, and the plays could never be described as naturalistic.

If Watson's plays owe something to vorticism, they owe something to McLuhanism as well. One might venture to say that Watson was attempting a new theatre form which reflected a new way of seeing one's way through the world. By describing his plays as mosaics, composed of parts of a puzzle which fit together but do not necessarily make a cohesive picture, one might understand them better. The audience is to simply sit back and "take them in." The audience's involvement is to passively observe it all. The plays themselves have no glue; the glue is the act of the audience sitting and watching.

In a conversation with Watson on Saturday, October 16, 1982, his idea of theatre was discussed.

The conversation began with a discussion of his latest book of poetry, Mass on Cowback, which uses number-grid poetry (and the title of which is the same as a Wyndham Lewis painting). Number-grid poetry explores a new poetry form, putting the words upon paper in a special way which enhances the rhythm of the poems and even determines how they must be read. It is a form which Watson has developed over a number of years and which he feels comes closest to defining the new poetic form of expression he has been searching for over the past several years. It is a very theatrical form of poetry, and must be read aloud or performed by a group of readers to be fully appreciated. Some of the poems require several voices reading simultaneously and are practically impossible to comprehend unless read aloud by more than one person.

Watson would admit that these poems come closest to achieving what he was attempting to achieve in the 1960's. That is, a new form of expression which compliments a new way of dealing with the world around us.

He makes mention of speech expert Kristin Linklater's Freeing The Natural Voice, which deals with developing the voice as a tool for expression, much as one would tune and practice a musical instrument. He mentions Linklater's book as a reference point for those interested in his poetry, as it deals in a technical way with the practical aspects of projecting poetry such as his, poetry which if used in the theatre, replaces the traditional forms of expression.

Until very recent years, the novel was a significant medium of human communication. However, it is read in solitude and silence and hence creates what Watson calls a society of "deaf-mutes." Up until the twentieth century the theatre mimicked the novel, says Watson, creating an audience of deaf-mutes. That is to say, the audience sat in passive silence, not actively responding to what was happening on stage, and listening to what was, for the most part, narration. It was a constrictive theatre form.

Attitudes, says Watson, create new forms. The sixties' attitude was freedom, therefore a theatre form which complimented this attitude was essential. There was no longer a deaf-mute attitude in society; there was instead, confrontation, conflict, questioning and in general a much more active response to the world than before.

Therefore, Watson says he was not trying to abandon language; rather, he was fighting the movement that was trying to abandon the word. He was trying to find, not a new language for the stage, but its rightful language.

Watson has interesting comments on the theatre of the absurd, while mentioning that he has come to certain realizations only recently. There are certain concepts which he is able to articulate now, but which he did not necessarily understand at the time he was writing the plays with which we are concerned here.

He makes interesting comments on the meaning of the word "absurd." "Surd" in French means "deaf." The theatre of the absurd evolved from the realization that life is absurd because the universe is deaf to us. We are crying to be heard but it cannot hear us and therefore has no answers for us. For example, if we are having a conversation and cannot understand each other, we say it is because we are deaf to each other. That is because we live in a deaf universe.

One of Watson's plays, Over Prairie Trails, written in 1966, has as its theme this phenomenon that the universe is deaf to us. We live under the fallacy that everything we do has significance. The two "characters" in the play struggle for freedom, to overcome the force controlling them. Their attempts are futile, but they go on, even though they realize their master cannot hear them and is oblivious to their struggles. Deaf to their pathetic attempts at gaining freedom, he continues to dominate them in the belief he is serving justice and certainly doing them a favour by keeping them veritable slaves. This, then, is Watson's version of the "absurd."

The use of cliché or icon, or "concrete symbol" is frequent in Watson's work. In their book, From Cliché to Archetype, he and Marshall McLuhan were trying to point out that some everyday images have been relegated to the status of icon, achieving an almost sacred state. One of the definitions of icon is "an object of uncritical devotion," like an idol, especially "a traditional belief or ideal."[17] Certain phrases or words in the contemporary vocabularly immediately evoke certain images, just as a religious icon has certain significance. As well, there is a sanctity to some of the images, "car" or "house", for example, denoting affluence, security or stability. By the way, in conversation Watson claims that the theory of icons (or archetypes) was his own, merely recorded by McLuhan. According to Watson, McLuhan was simply writing down Watson's ideas.

Whatever the case, they shared the idea of form having precedence over content as far as impact on the audience is concerned.

Sometimes Watson's plays seem to exemplify form for the sake of form, regardless of content. That is to say, Watson was so anxious to create a new kind of theatre that content, or plot, character, and action, were sacrificed. In keeping with McLuhan's theories, the medium--theatre--was the message, its content almost insignificant. The experience of going to Watson's kind of theatre and being exposed to a new medium was more important than what was actually heard or seen there.

When asked if he thought narration was passé, Watson answered that, yes, it is passé, and certainly not the most effective means of communication for the theatre. However, he feels that the telling of stories is still important. This would seem to contradict the nature of his plays, in which form precedes content.

That Watson's plays signify the importance of the medium itself as the message is a statement which therefore needs qualifying. Here Watson and McLuhan disagree somewhat. McLuhan's theory, as Watson explained it in the interview, would be that a painting of a turnip and a painting of a madonna are the same thing; they are both paintings. Watson, however, sees them as different entities, and prefers the painting of the madonna for its story-telling possibilities. It is an image which evokes thought and feeling, and "says something." It would appear, then, that Watson was seeking a new theatre form which abandoned narration but retained its story-telling potential.

One icon with which Watson deals in at least two of his plays, "O holy ghost . . ."* and "Let's Murder . ."** is technology. It is an icon insofar as it signifies progress and power, and is worshipped for its ability to change, if not improve, mankind. Animals, says Watson, are able to absorb themselves into an environment in order to satisfy their needs. The oyster-catcher, for example, incorporates himself into the oyster bed. Man, on the contrary, "outers" his needs instead of physically adapting himself to an environment. He tries to change the environment or invent a mechanism which enables the environment to work for him.

Watson expressed a concern in this same interview of October 16, 1982, that ultimately, man will turn his technology onto himself and destroy himself. Genetic engineering, for example, is man's way of restructuring his very self, and could be his downfall. In this instance man, says Watson, is not destroyed by sin; he is created by sin. Perhaps this is the case in all instances where technology is used by man to adapt the environment to his needs.

Both content- and form-wise Watson's plays are the products of a technological society. One of his favourite themes is technology, the many-headed monster, overtaking our society. Form-wise, his plays are constructed in a way to compliment the technological society of which they are products. They are complex, with many things happening at once, and each is a whole with a multitude of parts.

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* o holy ghost, DIP YOUR FINGER IN THE BLOOD OF CANADA and write, I LOVE YOU

** Let's Murder Clytemnestra According to the Principles of Marshall McLuhan

Just as even the most competent scientist must learn to deal with new technology, so must even the most well-schooled of audiences learn to adapt to a new theatre form. To very naive audiences, Watson's plays might have seemed the norm. They might have appeared matter-of-fact and easy to understand. To audiences such as Edmonton's at that time, used to straightforward narrative fare, these plays were impossible to fathom. The next section discusses the theatre conditions in Edmonton at the time Watson's plays were being produced.

CHAPTER III

A Discussion of Theatre in Edmonton in the 1960's

The history of theatre in Edmonton in the 1960s is one of rapid growth, paralleling the history of the city itself. In 1960 theatre was active in Edmonton, with enthusiasm and hope for the future, but all of the activity was amateur and uncertain of its direction. By 1970, the city housed two professional theatres and a professional acting school, and was confident that it was riding on the crest of a substantial wave of fortune and opportunity.

In 1960 the city itself was rich in natural resources, particularly oil, but did not know exactly how prosperous it might become, or just what to do with its resources. It had a population of 269,314,* but was not sure if it was still a prairie farming town or a cosmopolitan industrial city. By 1970 it was confident that it was well on the way to big-city sophistication. Its population was 429,750** and growing every day, and skyscrapers were springing up ready to house the businesses, banks, and head offices making Edmonton their centre of operation.

What had happened in those ten years to see the city and its theatre community grow through an awkward adolescence to cocky young adulthood? The answer to that question has to do with the effects of growth and prosperity, the activity of the Massey Commission and the Canada Council, and the exuberance and energy of the sixties.

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* Business Development Department, City of Edmonton

** ibid.

As the city prospered and expanded itself in the sixties, so theatre grew in all directions. The decade started with an active children's theatre program and a busy amateur theatre, and ended with a training school for actors and at least one professional theatre.

Children's theatre had existed in Edmonton since 1953. It was sponsored by the Junior League of Edmonton, and under the direction of Betty Anderson performed four or five times each year, packing young audiences into the auditorium of Victoria Composite High School. With such an active children's theatre in 1960, little wonder that there was an enthusiastic audience and a healthy pool of young talent by 1970. By 1970 there was also a Theatre for Young Audiences, which comprised the students of two high school performing arts programs. For students at the university level, the University of Alberta offered a Bachelor of Fine Arts acting program, which was established in 1964.

Theatre for adults had also been in existence for some time, on an amateur basis. Studio Theatre, operating on campus but not solely a function of the Department of Drama, had existed since 1949. Theatre Associates, an amateur group formed to encourage theatre through the production of plays, had formed in 1959. It used various venues, one of them the old Walterdale School, with which the group became associated until it was known as Walterdale Theatre Associates.

Studio Theatre operated with the support of the university, but Theatre Associates relied on membership fees and donations to sustain itself. These two theatres survived for the most part on enthusiasm, and kept Edmonton entertained for the first half of the 1960s, along with at least two amateur "opera" societies (their repertoire was more musical theatre than opera) and the occasional professional touring show.

1963-64, for example, was a hallmark season. Theatre Associates was into its fifth year of operation, Theatre for Children was in its tenth year, Studio Theatre was marking its fifteenth anniversary, and the Light Opera of Edmonton society was celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary. The Civic Opera Society and the Alberta Opera Society were new on the scene, having made their first appearances in 1961. This is not to mention Stage 64, a brand-new and what was to be short-lived effort that put on My Three Angels and The Night of January 17th in November of 1963 at the Strand Theatre.[1] As well, there was the All Saints Friendship Guild which put on the occasional religious drama at the All Saints Anglican Cathedral.

That so many performing organizations existed does not imply that there was a glut of theatre-going activities on the market. Some organizations offered only one production a year, and some performed in theatres with very limited seating capacity. In that 1963-64 season, the Alberta Opera Society gave only one formal presentation, an offering of excerpts from Faust and Il Trovatore in July, and that was to be their last production--hardly a season. The Civic Opera Society presented Cole Porter's Can Can in November 1963. The Light Opera of Edmonton, as their 25th anniversary production, performed Fanny by Harold Jacob Rose in March 1963. This was followed by The Unsinkable Molly Brown, by Meredith Wilson, in November 1963, and The Flower Drum Song by Richard Rodgers, in February 1964.

The amateur theatres had more well-rounded seasons. Walterdale had a six-play season in 1963-64. They presented: The Caretaker (Harold Pinter), A Taste of Honey (Delaney), Jack and the Beanstalk (sponsored by the Edmonton Symphony Society at the Jubilee Auditorium), Marriage Go Round (Leslie Stevens), Hedda Gabler (Henrik Ibsen), and Private Lives (Noel Coward). Studio Theatre mounted five productions: Giraudoux's Amphitryon 38, Shakespeare's Hamlet, Osborne's Look Back in Anger, a German-English production of Dorst's Die Kurve (The Curve), Moliere's La Mariage Force, and selected readings from Shakespeare entitled The Bard's Birthday. Theatre for Children presented Aladdin, The Three Bears, and The Mysterious Adventure.

There is no denying that theatre was alive and well. The performing arena was paralleled by a busy educational scene. The Western Canada Educational Theatre Conference took place in April of 1963, sponsored by Studio Theatre and the drama divison of the University of Alberta. Province-wide, there were three government-sponsored drama workshops for high school teachers, an annual provincial one-act play festival, a Western Canadian Community Theatre Conference in Banff, a Provincial Creative Drama and Theatre for Children Workshop, and an annual drama seminar which took place in Drumhellar (the 1964 session marking its fifth summer seminar).

By mid-decade, there was room for experimentation and for greater professionalism. As well, there was more tangible support for theatre. The Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, and Social Sciences, referred to as the Massey Commission, was established in 1949 and conducted numerous hearings and investigations, publishing its final report in 1951. It concluded that theatre was necessary and should be supported, which lead to the Canada Council, formed in 1957 to oversee culture in Canada by way of financial contributions.[2] With financial backing, amateur organizations could become professional, or at least make their efforts with confidence that there was support for them.

The confidence of financial security, coupled with the general confidence of the 1960s, lead to a burgeoning theatre across Canada. Professional theatre, in a sense, was allowed to exist by the generosity of the Canada Council, but the contribution of enthusiasm from the pervading attitude of that "era" known as the sixties cannot be ignored.

The 1963-64 season showed how amateur theatre had reached a peak in Edmonton. In the period 1964-66 there were significant developments which brought changes in the type of theatre being offered. The University of Alberta set up a professional actor training program. This would attract theatre professionals to teach, and talented young people to learn, both of whom would bring a valuable resource to the city. By 1965, plans were well underway for a professional theatre to open in the 1965-66 season. And finally, because there was an established (although amateur) theatre in Edmonton, there was room by 1964 for an "anti-Establishment," or alternate, theatre. Thus Yardbird Suite, which had existed since 1961 as a jazz club, would start producing avant-garde, original works and the occasional Canadian play, all under the direction of Bud D'Amur, who had grown up in Edmonton and had been active in amateur theatre for some time.

With the appearance on the Edmonton theatre scene of an "alternate" theatre and then, one year later, a mainstream professional theatre, two contrasting tastes in theatre were satisfied. One type of endeavour reflected an artistic desire, the other a profit-making desire. That the Yardbird was able to attract a small audience shows that the theatre-goers in Edmonton were sophisticated enough to support the avant-garde. When, a year later, a professional theatre (The Citadel) opened, it showed that the theatre-goers acknowledged that theatre could be more than a hobby; it could be a business too.

Ironically, there was only mimimal support for the type of work Yardbird offered, yet after enthusiastic support of the Citadel's conventional fare for a time, there was a longing for something with more substance. While theatregoers disdained the more bizarre presentations at Yardbird, they wanted fare which, like a Yardbird play, was anything but safe and conventional

An episode from the history of Walterdale Theatre Associates will illustrate how theatre patrons acknowledged that there was a place for alternate theatre, but did not want to support it. In March of 1965 The New Tenant by Eugene Ionesco and Happy Days by Samuel Beckett were put on by Theatre Associates at Walterdale. They received a negative reaction from the reviewer Barry Westgate:

> These two gave us something from out of the rambling, confused mumblings that make up for this type of theatre--theatre that should be confined to experimental workshops, dimly-lit cellars and 'in-groups' who are merely trying to fool themselves. We have such places in town--and there is no need for one of our best theatre centres to waste precious dates on it. 3

The encouraging part of this review is that Westgate is acknowledging that there is a place for the "anti-Establishment" theatre which, as previously mentioned, was testing its voice. The discouraging part is that he concludes it is a waste of time. He is joined by at least one angry citizen, who refused to be condescended to by intellectuals:

> I think we deserve something better than to be patted on the head now and told to run along because theatre has got a little too intellectual for us . . . . I am willing to be a regular theatregoer. But, dear drama groups, if you plan on my particular admission price per show, don't belittle

> me by telling me I'm not smart enough to go to your shows.[4]

On the other hand, Edmontonians objected to the "beer town" label being pasted on them. Mr. Westgate had complained of the lack of sophistication in Edmonton's night life, not to mention the lack of night life of any kind. This caused a reaction from readers who insisted that Edmonton was a more cosmopolitan city than Westgate thought. On the one hand, the citizenry wanted to be recognized as smart but not intellectual, just "plain folks," while on the other hand they demanded that someone recognize how sophisticated they had become.

The opening of a professional theatre in 1965 acknowledged their sophistication; the choice of plays, with one or two exceptions, acknowledged their desire for non-condescending simplicity. In its first season, 1965-66, the Citadel theatre presented:

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf
Under the Yum Yum Tree
Bell, Book and Candle
Come Back, Little Sheba
Never Too Late
Death of a Salesman
Come Blow Your Horn
The Glass Menagerie

Westgate described *Never Too Late* as "shallow commercialism" and *Come Blow Your Horn* as "theatre of no ideas."[5]

All this is meant to describe the climate in which the plays of Wilfred Watson were presented, and to illustrate how little of the sixties-type drama described earlier was evident on the Edmonton theatre scene. Other than the occasional production of a Watson play or a special project at the University, there was little avant-garde work being done.

The only aspect of the sixties in which Edmonton was caught up was the desire for a smaller theatre. This was a practical need too; it is easier to be economically successful in a smaller theatre. But for the most part, it was intended to satisfy an artistic desire.

For a long time in the city, there had been a battle (with city council mostly) for, if not a smaller theatre, at least a building designed specifically for theatre. The buildings in which theatre was housed were either too large or too small. The community musicals and touring shows were presented at the Northern Jubilee Auditorium, with a seating capacity of 2694,* much too large for intimate theatre. Walterdale Theatre, an old schoolhouse at 10627-91 Avenue, had a capacity of about 70.** Studio Theatre, in the old Education Building on campus (now E.A. Corbett Hall), sat about 250.***

There were various groups caught up in the intimate theatre craze (a "craze," one might say, which had been simmering since the days of André Antoine's Théâtre Libre). A French drama group, formed in 1962 and performing in the

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* Business Office, Northern Alberta Jubilee Auditorium

** Edmonton Journal, November 27, 1961, p. 17

*** Department of Drama, University of Alberta

66-seat theatre at College St. Jean, called itself quite fittingly, "Theatre la Boutique."[6] Theatre Upstairs was an adjunct to Studio Theatre, and was formed in 1961 as a playwrights' workshop. It performed upstairs in the old Education Building, in a remodelled library reading room.

The theatrical community was caught up in the excitement of the "intimate theatre" movement which dawned with the Age of Aquarius, and could not wait to get actors performing on the audience's lap. Indeed, the excitement over a local high school's new arena stage in 1961 was that it was purported to be the city's first theatre-in-the-round and that part of the audience would be sitting right on the stage.[7]

That same year, Theatre Associates were attempting to raise $5,000 to renovate the old Walterdale School "as an intimate theatre." In fact, Theatre Associates advertised themselves as a "private theatre club" open to "members only."[8] Theatre at that time was a coterie, something a small group of friends got together and shared.

> Theatre Associates is now organized as a club for actors and audience. Actors, production staff and stage crew are the active members, audience the associate members of the club.[9]

The review of Epitaph for George Dillon cites the smallness of the theatre and the proximity of the audience to the stage, as if it is a new and wonderful development.

But city council was not as enthusiastic about intimate theatre, and granted approval of a new Legion Hall instead of a theatre in the Civic Centre because "Council was told by Commissioners that there is not enough demand to justify building the theatre suggested in the plan. . . ."[10]

Phillip Silver, a young actor-designer who had performed with Theatre for Children and Playground Players, and who would later become a respected stage designer across Canada, presented his views on theatre size in an interview in August, 1964, prior to his departure for the National Theatre School in Montreal:

> 'The Jubilee Auditorium, beautiful as it is, has also done a great deal of harm to local theatre--local groups just don't have the power to fill the auditorium. But local audiences have developed an auditorium complex, and want to attend performances there because of its snob appeal, in spite of the fact that local groups cannot perform well in the huge building. 11

The debate continued a month later:

> To Dennis Sweeting, CBC drama critic, actor and president of Toronto's New Play Society and writer of an October 3 article in Maclean's, it [theatre] means a small, intimate structure where 'living, native theatre can be nourished.'
>
> To David Barr, acting chairman of the Alberta government's Auditorium's Management Committee, it means large auditoriums 'built for much more than a profit-making venture'; built as structures for 'cultural development and community service.' 12

Out of this demand for intimate theatre, two theatres arose, yet they were extreme opposities. Yardbird Suite was tiny, and presented bizarre new works. The Citadel Theatre was of moderate size, and presented a variety of proven works. One operated with a reactionary, audacious spirit. The other accommodated itself to society, functioning in the mainstream of the cultural and business community.

This survey of Edmonton theatre in the 1960s has attempted to show that there was a thriving theatre community in the city. With such a fervent interest in the theatre, and an active university drama department, there was a thirst for experimentation and variety. If these were not to be provided by Walterdale and the Citadel, then they would be provided by Studio Theatre, which had a mandate to experiment with what is new in theatre. Yardbird Suite also experimented, having risen from a desire to present alternatives to mainstream drama. The material they used for their efforts at experimentation came from Wilfred Watson, who wrote plays different from any others being done in the city, and who voiced the opinion that theatre was out of touch with the reality of the times. Armed with a philosophy of trying to write plays which expressed the spirit of the sixties, he might have seemed, to his fellow artists and to an audience, to be ahead of his time. He might have appeared to be a poet holding a key which would unlock the door to the secrets causing all the upheaval in society. With traditional values and behavior set topsy-turvy, directors, designers, actors, and audiences would be drawn to someone who claimed to understand it all and might be able, through his plays, to tell them why things had been turned upside down. They discovered that he had no answers to the questions; he merely re-posed them. He attempted poetic and theatrical reflections of society. His works were intended to be mirrors of society, but he was unable to describe the substance, the "reality" reflected in the mirror.

If he failed to satisfy that enduring desire to know all the answers to life's quandries, he at least wrote plays which had the same irreverance and iconoclasm as the productions being done in larger theatre circles. His works then, became Edmonton's way of showing how it could keep up with the times. Like other theatre entrepreneurs in the sixties, he shocked and unsettled a complacent audience. Perhaps his greatest success came when Cockrow and the Gulls, his first major production (at Studio Theatre), spurred members of the community to write articulate letters of protest to the local newspaper in response to an unfavourable review. Perhaps his second-greatest response was the silent voice of agreement to the reviewer's comments. Later productions made audiences angry, disgusted and indignant that such nonsensical drivel was being peddled on them. This is the real "anti-success" of Watson's, that audiences were made aware that there were different types of theatre, and that theatre was not meant to be pleasant, unprovocative, or to tell a story in narrative style. Watson's plays presented an alternative, and Watson was a creative force for those who dared productions of his plays. He forced, for example, the students at Studio Theatre to dabble in the psychedelic;

he forced the amateur actors at Yardbird to test the rhythmic waters of his strange poetry, and to make sense of it. He challenged traditional forms and upset the status quo.

The critical response to that challenge is recorded in the following chapter, as part of the chronology of performances of his plays.

CHAPTER IV

A History of the Productions of Watson's Plays, and of the Yardbird Suite

Two theatres, Studio Theatre and Yardbird Suite, undertook productions of Watson's plays, each for different reasons. Studio Theatre, discussed earlier, had a history of producing new and experimental works; their first production in 1949 was of Pirandello's Henry IV. Studio's association with a university gave them a mandate to expose their student actors and their audience to what was new in the theatre world. The plays at Yardbird Suite, on the other hand, were produced as the product of one person's imagination, and were presented as an alternative to the established and more traditional theatre in the city. Yardbird was opened by Tommy Banks and Phil Shragg, two local musicians, as a jazz club in 1961. The Yardbird Suite's first two seasons, in the Old Steakloft in downtown Edmonton, were informal ones, consisting of after-midnight jam sessions and the occasional poetry reading. In 1964 Bud D'Amur, a native Edmontonian who had been involved with amateur theatre for some time, initiated the production of plays in the Yardbird's new location at 104 Street and Whyte Avenue.

However, the first production of one of Watson's major plays was at Studio Theatre, and it was this production which was to sow the seed for the Yardbird's growth, as Bud

D'Amur was an actor in the production and was introduced to Watson at that time.

The history of the Watson-Studio and Watson-Yardbird collaborations is documented mostly in the pages of the Edmonton Journal by advertisements for upcoming productions, reviews of plays, and minor items of information in entertainment columns.

The production of Cockrow and the Gulls gets the history of Watson's plays off to a tumultuous start. Its opening, on March 29, 1962 at Studio Theatre, was heralded as a "Premiere" and was anticipated as "one of the most unusual productions to be seen at Studio Theatre."[1] Several out-of-town dignitaries were to attend, most of whom would be participating in a theatre conference being held at the university.

But there was some disappointment after its first performance, at least on the part of an Edmonton Journal staff writer, Desmond Bill, who reviewed the play and wrote:

> Wilfred Watson has attempted a journey through the night of the soul.
>
> Unfortunately he appears to have become lost in the darkness and to have ended up in a cul-de-sac. This occurs shortly after curtain rise but is not apparent for some time.
>
> The delay is due to the distraction of a torrent of words, of bewildering changes in action, of absurdity and bizarre situations. By intermission the dazzled spectator has begun to wonder where all this leads.
>
> The second half confirms suspicions. This play goes nowhere.[2]

But this same writer gives credit to Gordon Peacock's direction which he says made for a "brilliant theatrical presentation," and Watson's language, which "made an evening to remember."[3]

The review started a storm of protest in the form of no less than eleven letters to the Editor of the Journal, most of them supporting the play and condemning the short-sightedness of Mr. Bill's review. The letter writers insisted that there was plot, theme, and characterization in this play which Mr. Bill had obviously found confusing. There were other reviews and articles to support the opinions of the Watson supporters. Nathan Cohen said the play was about "characters trying to find salvation for others on terms which they are not prepared to meet themselves."[4] The Saskatoon Star Phoenix wrote that "the words, not the personifications of them, are the important element in Mr. Watson's play."[5]

In an article in Alphabet, a literary magazine, Ian Sowton wrote that "Watson knows his theatre and is a fine arranger of crescendos and manager of moments," but cited the excellence of the acting and direction as responsible for much of the production's success.[6] In yet another article in yet another literary publication, John W. Bilsland, while noting the flaws in the play, wrote that "any author who in his first play could write a Cockrow and the Gulls is potentially a great dramatist."[7] Bilsland wrote another article, published in Tamarack Review, which chronicles the history of Studio Theatre and records the tumult following the premiere of Cockrow and the Gulls.[8]*

That this play attracted such far-reaching attention is testament to its importance as a unique presentation to the theatre community of Edmonton, and to the respect given to Watson as a poet. This respect was particularly due to his collection, Friday's Child, which received a Governor General's award in 1955. The literary community was anxious to see how this successful poet would deal with the verse form in the theatre, and the theatre community was excited by the prospect of something new and different happening on the stage.

Included in the cast of Cockrow and the Gulls was Bud D'Amur, who played one of the devils. Mr. D'Amur had been involved with theatre in Edmonton for some time, having performed with Betty Anderson's children's groups, and having been involved with the formation of Theatre Associates. In October 1964, two years after Cockrow, he opened a "new" Yardbird Suite at 104 Street and Whyte Avenue. This was the realization of one of his dreams, and an opportunity to do what he describes as "something with substance . . . Canadian maybe, but just anything."** In collaboration with Watson, D'Amur hoped to promote original Canadian plays in an intimate environment, and looked forward to audience involvement. In an article in the Journal of October 23, 1964, he said:

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* This article also mentions the founding in 1961 of Interface, "a group 'to promote the writing and production of drama of first intensity,'" a group founded by Gordon Peacock and Wilfred Watson.

** Interview, May 5, 1983

> 'This will compare with theatres in New York and the East. . . . Theatre should be a place of debate--not like a church or listening to a lecture. If you feel involved you should get involved.'[9]

To initiate that involvement, Watson's Wail for Two Pedestals was first presented at the Yardbird on November 3, 1964[10] and the weekends of December 30 to 30, 1964, directed by Bud D'Amur. The Journal reviewer Barry Westgate found that he liked the play, but could find no reason for liking it:

> It is all so incredibly idiotic. One searches, ever searches for hidden meanings, or even progress through a normal tale. But if there are meanings and progress the thing goes too quickly to reveal them. At first glance there is nothing. Perhaps a second, or even a third appraisal would uncover reason.[11]

Not desiring such further appraisal of the work, Westgate is content to like it for no reason, and to commend the Yardbird as "a place in Edmonton audacious enough to move into an alien field and stay with it, whatever the reaction."[12]

On the strength of commendations such as Westgate's, the Yardbird thrived in a small way for some time, mainly due to its jazz and folk concerts, its weekly Saturday midnight jam sessions, and the occasional hootenanny. There were readings by Irving Layton, W.O. Mitchell, Henry Kreisel, and cartoonist Yardley Jones, who read from the works of

Dylan Thomas.

Of the nine plays D'Amur attempted to produce, four were by Watson. The word "attempt" is used because one of the plays, Over Prairie Trails, was well into rehearsal when it was cancelled. There were two other original works, The Gate by Jim Salt (performed in March 1966) and Escape by John Orrell (performed in April 1966). The other three plays produced were: The Bald Soprano (January 1965), The Dumbwaiter (October 1965) and Zoo Story (June 1966). None of these caused the stir, or received the same newspaper coverage, as Watson's plays.

Watson's plays would be mounted in Edmonton several more times. There were three more productions at Yardbird, two more at Studio Theatre, a one-act at Walterdale, and a full-length at SUB Theatre. They always caught attention because of their audacity, incomprehensibility, and their bizarreness.

The next to be produced was Chez Vous, Comfortable Pew which opened at the Yardbird Suite in May 1965, and was proclaimed an "Unquestionable Success." The review article by Barry Westgate concluded,

> . . . it was an evening of high points from a near-perfect cast, an adventure in adsurdity that entertained. Now that that requirement has been well and truly met we can spend a little time with Dr. Watson's words, and find our own answers to them. 13

As this excerpt indicates, the thrust of Westgate's article was that the production was a success due to the cast's brilliant performances. They managed, with their dancing, singing, and "cavorting" to keep at least one audience member entertained, which was of primary importance. Understanding the play was secondary. He called it an "absurd farce that thrives on its absurdity" and so found no reason to make any sense of it.

The enthusiastic response to Chez Vous, Comfortable Pew at the Yardbird Suite led to its re-opening at the Embers, an Edmonton supper club, in September 1965. This was an attempt at dinner theatre, but as D'Amur comments, "most of them [the audience] would have preferred a strip show."* There was a letter of commendation written to the Journal by an Embers patron who had enjoyed this sixties-style dinner theatre, but hers was a lone voice.[14]

With the next production, in October 1965, of Tom Jones Meets Fanny Hill, more credit was given to Watson's writing ability. He received at least half the credit for the play's success:

> Actually this is not much more than a series of performances--fashioned on paper by Dr. Watson as a vehicle for comment on or against the Establishment, and on stage by director Bud D'Amur as an entertainment. In many respects both intents are successful.[15]

The manuscript of this play is not available, but one gathers from the review that it is highly satirical, taking jabs at the civic, provincial and federal governments. The delight with it is because it deals with local subjects, making it topical and relevant to its audience.

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* Interview, May 5, 1983

In January of 1966 the Yardbird received a $540 grant from the Allied Arts Council, a sizeable sum for the Yardbird at that time.[16] For awhile, it seemed to thrive as a venue for jazz and folk music, poetry readings, and the occasional play.

But by August of 1966 the Yardbird could not report continuing success. It was closing its doors, due to "a lack of the support necessary to sustain it on a regular basis."[17] Clashes with officials over the fire and building codes were also a problem, but Mr. D'Amur was looking forward to opening a new plant in a new facility, again with the intention of concentrating on "original theatre."[18]

Perhaps an indication that the Yardbird was floundering can be seen in the fact that another play by Watson, Over Prairie Trails, had been scheduled for a production in May, 1966, but was cancelled at the last minute. In an article written before the cancellation, Barry Westgate had written of this venture:

> Full marks to the Suite, as usual. But it is a pity that nowhere else but there in this city can people involved in these particular endeavours get a worthwhile opportunity to present their talents.[19]

Thus it appears there was moral support for the operation, and a need for it, but the financial support so desperately needed was not forthcoming. The $540 grant did not stretch far enough.

And so in the Edmonton Journal of August 23, 1966 there is a minor headline, "Yardbird Closes Doors, Promises New Operation"[20] and an article by Barry Westgate. He reports that the Yardbird has floundered due to lack of support, but that it is planning to open in a new venue, where it will specialize in original plays. He reports that other clubs now fill the Yardbird's function of providing jazz and folk music, and that the performers (both musical and dramatic) it trained could now find work elsewhere.

By February 1967, however, jazz concerts were again being offered in Yardbird, and in March another play by Watson was offered, Thing in Black. This Yardbird Suite was under a new management, not Bud D'Amur's, and Westgate could find nothing good to say about this performance, which was directed by Peter Montgomery.

> Through the by-now well-defined lines of Watson's style of playwriting Thing in Black states itself as nothing more than a kind of literary athleticism couched to shoot humorous snidery here, there and everywhere . . . In theatre of this style and intent there is scant invitation to pursue the matter further.[21]

This appears to have been the death knell for Yardbird. There is an announcement on March 23, 1967 that saxophonist Phil Woods is to appear at the Suite,[22] but after that references to drama at the Yardbird Suite disappear from the contents of the Edmonton Journal.

The Yardbird Suite's absence is lamented in an article of March 16, 1968, where Barry Westgate is pleading the cause of local playwrights who have no opportunity to see their works performed:

> There used to be a Yardbird Suite for the items of new theatre and theatre experimentation that came along. Wilfred Watson made a minor career there and other local writers have had their chance. 23

In an interview article of November 24, 1967, Watson himself lamented:

> The suite gave us the opportunity--the things we did there seemed to have a special kind of spontaneity. 24

With all its lack of success in a materialistic sense, and even its lack of critical success, the importance of Yardbird was not ignored. It was acknowledged as an essential place for experimentation and artistic adventure. It was recognized, at least by Westgate in his August 23, 1966 article, as a "school" for aspiring actors and playwrights. And at times, it was the only place offering jazz concerts and folk music.

The Watson-D'Amur collaboration was therefore short-lived but significant in Edmonton's sixties' theatre history. The only formula which Mr. D'Amur claims to have used in directing Watson's plays was to make them thoroughly entertaining and fun, and to ban the playwright from rehearsals. D'Amur says of Wail for Two Pedestals that "you created off the top of your head."* Thus a spirit of freedom, improvisation and spontaneity pervaded the productions of Watson's plays.

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*Interview, May 5, 1983

The career of Wilfred Watson did not end with the demise of the Yardbird Suite. Productions of Watson's plays were yet to follow, at Studio Theatre, Walterdale, and SUB Theatre.

Studio Theatre's December 1967 production of *O holy ghost, DIP YOUR FINGER IN THE BLOOD OF CANADA, and write, I LOVE YOU*, directed by Thomas Peacocke, was the first attempt at a full-scale multi-media "Total Theatre Experience," and foreshadowed the 1969 production of *Let's Murder Clytemnestra According to the Principles of Marshall McLuhan*, which went to even greater lengths to create a multi-media event.

The Department of Drama had been granted funds by the Edmonton Civic Centennial Committee to present a new play as part of the celebrations of Canada's centenary. Proposals for plays were submitted from across the country, and Watson's was selected as the one to be produced.

Watson, director Tom Peacocke, and designer Leonard Feldman collaborated to create a "total theatre experience," which encompassed several elements. For one, the audience was not separated from the stage by a proscenium arch, nor did they sit in conventional auditorium seats. The "stage" consisted of a narrow ramp, from which another ramp jutted out at right angles, and which in turn split to form the prongs of a "Y" formation. Seats were removed from the auditorium and replaced by mattresses and back rests. The players entered the action through the audience, thus involving them in the action.

The audience was bombarded with sight and sound effects. There were nine screens mounted around the playing area, upon which a multitude of images were projected in rapid succession. Local musician Anne Burrows wrote special electronic music for the production. Designer Leonard Feldman clothed the actors in brightly colored hippie garb. As Watson said in an interview prior to the play's opening, "We have made this into a sort of psychedelic assault on the senses."[25] The purpose of this "assault," said director Tom Peacocke, was to create a theatrical metaphor for the contemporary environment:

> Just as man is forced to select from the millions of stimuli coming at him from his environment, so too will the audience need to make selections as to what to watch, and what to listen to.[26]

The production was only partially successful. Barry Westgate dubbed it a "Thoroughly Absorbing Adventure in Theatre" and cited the "youthful exuberance" and "bright inventiveness" of the production. However, he also remarked that "it is not, in any verbal degree, a notable advance by the author."[27] Both Westgate and another reviewer, Shirley Swartz, noted that the difficulty of Watson's language overshadowed the psychedelic effects. As Westgate said, "The play, with or without its devices, is a prime example of Watson's penchant for verbal assault,"[28] while the visual and aural assault are left by the wayside. Neither Westgate nor Swartz condemned the use of multi media. The problem with the production, they said, is that the media are not loud enough, nor bright enough, nor overwhelming enough. Swartz said that the production needed "Ten times as many projections at twenty times the speed."[29] And Westgate maintained that "With these effects given more purpose the production might BOUND OUT from the admirable mein of blackness that Peacocke has created."[30] Westgate's article ends with a positive note. He commends the effort and adventuresome spirit inherent in this production, and there is a note of encouragement in his words. The people involved are encouraged to keep trying, and any prospective audience members are also encouraged to give the work a try.

Similarly, Westgate makes no claim to understanding Watson's next effort, a one-act play at Theatre Associates in March of 1968 titled Two Tear Drops Frozen on a Rear View Mirror. He says, "I don't really know what Watson is on about, and make no apology for that," but encourages the readers to go and see for themselves--those who "are familiar with Dr. Watson's other highly-colored work."[31]

The article in which this minor review is contained is on the whole a plea on behalf of new dramatists, that they may have access to facilities with which their works can be performed. Yardbird is mourned as having been such a place for budding playwrights.

On November 21, what Barry Westgate described as "that very distinctive four-letter obscenity" was spoken on the stage of Studio Theatre, marking an important debut in Edmonton's theatre world. It is that innovation which receives first mention in Barry Westgate's review, not any innovation which might have occurred with the staging of this new play by Wilfred Watson. In fact, Westgate takes a "ho-hum" approach to the production, as if Watson's plays are becoming predictably unintelligible. He describes Let's Murder Clytemnestra According to the Principles of Marshall McLuhan as a "cacaphony" of nonsense. Then he goes on to say that "On top of that, Engle's production is for him surprisingly pedestrian and lacking in imagination."[32]

Westgate's scathing review fails to acknowledge the important development which occurred with the production of Clytemnestra. While previous productions had been a writer/designer/director collaboration, Clytemnestra brought about a significant new collaboration: writer/designer/director/technology.* Clytemnestra was a turning point for Watson in terms of his thinking as a theatre person. In DIP he was still (as in Cockrow) using theatrical effects such as a change in the audience-performer relationship, bombardment of the senses, physical and vocal action, and change of theatre space. The innovation in DIP was with the use of psychedelic effects such as screens which projected the clichés, slogans and aphorisms of sixties culture. The innovation in Clytemnestra was the incorporation of technology into the action of the play. Technology was not an effect--it was another character, another persona in the drama. In essence, the electronic media used in Clytemnestra replaced the theatrical and verbal effects such as those used in DIP.

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* The following discussion of Clytemnestra summarizes my notes from a meeting with Norman Yates on September 29, 1983.

The set represented a huge operating arena with a steel operating table at its centre. This centre stage area was flanked by banks of TV monitors facing the audience. Stage right the monitors were arranged in two horizontal rows of four; stage left they were arranged in two vertical rows of four. Overhead was a twelve-foot screen which also monitored the action on stage. There were several cameras in operation throughout the performance, including one upstage which turned itself upon the stage action and the audience beyond the stage. There was also a camera mounted within the huge operating lamp positioned over the operating table.

The play's designer, Norman Yates, describes the play as a stage production with extensions, the extensions being electronic media. The monitors fed directly from the action, creating a further visual effect from the live action. The audience was thus flooded with the action and surrounded by it. By this means--television--the meaning of the play was put forth. That is, that technology is an impartial, ever-present, ever-functioning probe into our lives. The medium of television, which records reality, magnifies it, and brings it closer to us, is a powerful force. In this production, by virtue of its magnitude and its number, it was an all-pervasive force not recording the action, but ultimately creating it.

Professor Yates describes how he intended with the TV cameras and monitors, to extend the audience's senses. The cameras provided each audience member with 10 more sets of eyes. Through the monitors, they had at their disposal a three-dimensional view of the action, thanks to the travelling camera at the back of the action and the camera above the operating table.

With these ever-recording cameras, says Yates, there was a denial of illusion. The cameramen were instructed to continue working the cameras should the action on stage stop. By this means there was continuous action. The act of filming the stage action became the dramatic action itself. The actors on stage were concerned with creating an illusion; the television cameras, by televising the illusion and projecting it to the audience, made it a reality. The heads of the characters on the monitors were more real than the action on stage, because they had no sense of rehearsal but always seemed real and raw, threatening, as stated earlier, to destroy the illusion on stage. Actors are continuously inter-relating, always building to passion. A television camera, as Yates explains, is "cool"--impartial, detached, dispassionate--and thereby perhaps more real in that it is not heightened, exaggerated or lacking spontaneity as is the well-rehearsed stage presentation. Yates likens the TV camera as it was used in this production, to the scapel as it is used in an operation. It is the most significant part of the action, the most essential "prop," but not in any way emotionally involved. The doctor is _involved_ in the operation; the patient is _involved_ in the operation; the scapel is the essential tool used to make the operation happen, but it is not _involved_. The camera, in the production of _Clytemnestra_, made things happen, even created the action, but was not _involved_ in the action. Yates describes it as a "probe."

To describe the play and its significance, Yates says that "the play itself was the setting for a medium."* That is a contradiction of the usual description of a play's function, which is that a play is seen as a medium itself. According to Yates's interpretation of the play, Watson's words are simply the departure point for a production. The act of actors speaking his words is the significant event, not the meaning of the words themselves. That was extended in the production of _Clytemnestra_ to mean that the act of TV cameras televising the action on stage was the significant event, not the action on stage itself.

Technology has been described in this thesis as a many-headed monster. Yates says that its impartiality prevents it from being a monster. The people _using_ the technology are to be feared, not the technology itself. In the play, Yates wanted technology to be impartial, but always present. In 1969 given the newness of some of the technology used in the production of Clytemnestra (cables which got in the way, power failures due to over-loaded systems, the 12-foot screen very kindly donated by the audiovisual department which had acquired it without having had a great demand for the use of it), the technology was crude, but very present.

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* Interview, 29 Sept. 1983

The camera is able to record without comment or embellishment. It simply says "here is what is happening," thus never moralizing, and thus an effective tool in the theatre. Its very nature-its magnifying of the minute and distant, its immediacy--makes it dramatic. Through its impartiality it becomes a medium between stage and audience, bringing the action on stage closer to the audience. Since 1969, the use of cameras and monitors has been perfected. Witness rock concerts, where the performer is almost secondary to his image projected on towering screens.

Yates says that with this play the physical setting was not as significant as the use of technology, and the psychedelic effects were secondary to the technological probe. He also reports that this innovation required a different involvement of the audience member's senses. No longer required to listen to words and watch the actors on stage, they were confronted with banks of monitors and up to 17 different images, not including the figures on stage. New to this effect, some were confused and did not know where to look. Others learned how to use the effect, and to absorb different elements. Watson's attempt at non-narrative, non-linear theatre required the audience to divert its attention from the linear, audience-facing-stage relationship, and focus on the action in a disjointed, zig-zag fashion, looking at several different images in different places over the space of a few seconds. Not everyone understood these principles ("... the Principles of Marshall McLuhan" as they might be called), including the actors and the camera operators. As the play progressed, however, the actors realized that they were not necessarily telling a story; the act of their performing was the story. And the cameramen realized that, although they were directed to focus on the person speaking or on the central action, or onto the same image as their fellow operators (creating an eerie chorus effect of 16 monitors transmitting the same image) they came to realize that they were not filming the action; their act of filming was the action.

Unfortunately the reviewer failed to understand the significance of the fourth collaborator in this production. Westgate claimed that "this mechanical additive is dull and pointless, and not at all contributory to the drama or the theatric effect."[33]

Watson's feelings about technology and media were expressed in an article prior to the play's opening:

> 'I started to write a novel about a group of people trying to tell each other what McLuhan meant--they were all sure they knew better than anyone else. . . .
>
> But I broke this off when I realized that McLuhan's central idea, that the media are extensions of Man, was a dead metaphor. So I decided to write a play about the death of this metaphor . . . .
>
> Man deals with himself as if he were a new kind of concrete poem. Man is no longer content to paint his body, he paints with his body--his body is the paint he paints with. The new kind of man is like a self-portrait of what a paint-brush should be, by a paint-brush.
>
> This is a new age we are entering. Its first great achievement was a contraceptive pill, which, along with the new psychedelic use of drugs must be taken as an attempt to change the structure of the human body.
>
> We will be able to abolish wars, but it will be at the cost of abolishing the human body as it now exists. It's a cliché, the human body. And it's about time we turned it into a new probe.' 34

In this statement, with its premonition of the genetic engineering possibilities which become closer to reality every day, Watson makes a more lucid and prophetic statement than he was able to make with any of his plays.

Barry Westgate's series of negative reviews might indicate that he failed to understand Watson's intentions. However, the following comment about Watson's playwriting style shows that he understood this bizarre new technique:

> . . . he deliberately shuns the conventions. He doesn't waste words to explain what his plays are about. He seeks a total effect, by building line upon line, by assaulting the senses in whatever way possible. Somehow, through this deliberate onslaught, he hopes to make a point. 35

While he understands the intention, however, he contends that it is never realized in the plays' productions.

Westgate was not the only reviewer at odds with Watson's work. In March of 1970, Up Against the Wall Oedipus opened at the SUB Theatre. Bob Harvey of the Journal described it as "tiresome, irritating drivel."[36] Even the integration of television and films, sets designed by artist Norman Yates, and a special score by musicians Frank Phillet and Neil MacIver could not salvage this production as far as Mr. Harvey was concerned.

There has not been a full-scale public performance of a play by Wilfred Watson since 1970, although there have been some poetry readings. Most recently, in February 1983, there were two presentations of his poetry, in conjunction with the celebrations of the University of Alberta's 75th Anniversary. Publication of his plays, articles, poetry, and books, is ongoing. In 1970, From Cliché to Archetype, a collaboration with Marshall McLuhan, was published. Over Prairie Trails, Wail for Two Pedestals, The Canadian Fact, and The Woman Taken in Adultery are all plays which have been published in periodicals as recently as 1980.

Watson was able to accept that there would be a cool response to his plays. He makes a telling statement in an interview prior to the opening of O holy ghost, DIP YOUR FINGER IN THE BLOOD OF CANADA, and write, I LOVE YOU:

> If you are going to be a Canadian dramatist you can't win, so you might as well be experimental.[37]

This chronicle of the productions of his plays shows how, with one or two exceptions the director, actors, and designer were lauded for their experimentation, exuberance, and craftsmanship. The playwright, however, was uniformly chastised for being verbose and difficult to understand. The seeds of those colorful and innovative productions were planted in Watson's plays, and the discussion which follows is meant to uncover those seeds of innovation.

CHAPTER V

Analyses of Some of Watson's Plays

In that period of exploration, Watson wrote plays which toyed with many ideas, and which in an effort to fathom the multi-consciousness and the multi-environment of man, ended up being confusing. Plot? Watson's plays seem to have no plot, because in life there is no plot, just a sequence of unrelated events as we move in and out of a variety of consciousnesses. A unity of time, place or action? Real twentieth-century life holds no such unity, when multi-media expose us to the past, present, and future all at once. Rational conversation? How long is any one conversation, or how rational is it, when one of its participants is watching a news program on television and the other listens to electronic music over a headset? Thus Watson's plays seemed a hodge-podge of action--a reflection of life in the 1960's.

In the sixties theatre movement in Edmonton, there were no public Happenings. Only scripted works were done, and no one director dominated the avant-garde or imposed a completely new production style on the theatre. It was a playwright whose works encompassed all the experimentation of Happenings and improvisation, and which demanded to be performed in unconventional spaces, using new acting techniques and requiring imagination and innovation on the part of the director.

The brief study of sixties theatre undertaken earlier in this work emphasized the non-verbal aspect of that theatre. Watson's work never abandons the word as an essential ingredient. As he does in his 1964 letter to the Editor of the Edmonton Journal, Watson might ask proponents of non-verbal theatre to reconsider their interpretation of McLuhan. As Watson sees it, McLuhan's point is not that the word is obsolete, but,

> that since the development of electronic devices of information processing, writing is in fact being abandoned by business and by institutions. . . . Consequently, there is a need to cultivate the habit of writing as never before . . . men are going to be assigned to problems which require the ability to perceive configurations and to deal with intricate webs of inter-relationships.[1]

Watson was a champion of the word and a poet first and foremost. His plays therefore are literary works. They are full of puns and allusions; Watson is constantly playing with words. Why then, would he choose to write plays? Because he felt poetry is meant to be heard, not read. Poetry, Watson believes, is music which uses the human speaking voice as an instrument. In the postscript of a letter he wrote, Watson said, "Real poetry cries out for a physical outering of its words."[2] That implies more than verbalization. It implies a physical manifestation of the words; it implies a realization of symbol and metaphor.

This process of making symbols concrete is found in the plays of Ionesco. In order to say "people are as stubborn and near-sighted as rhinoceri," Ionesco has the characters in his play transformed into rhinoceri. To put forth the claim, "humanity is as complacent as a room full of chairs" he uses an audience of real chairs in one of his plays, bringing metaphor to reality.

Watson calls these metaphors "icons."* An article comes to represent many things and is worshipped for what it represents. An image becomes a cliché, its significance universally understood. In Let's Murder Clytemnestra According to the Principles of Marshall McLuhan, Watson is trying to express two sides of an argument. To accomplish this, he describes an operating table on which lies a patient, and on either side of the table stand characters voicing each side of the argument.

But for all its ingenuity and cleverness, Watson's poetry was frequently too convoluted to understand. The most successful productions of his plays owed their success to intelligent staging and energetic, enthusiastic acting. The reviews of Cockrow, which have already been discussed, found no fault with the director or the actors' work, but noted the shortcomings of the play.

Croyden describes sixties theatre as "deliberately submerging the playwright, depend[ing] more than ever upon the art of the actor and to a greater degree upon that of the director."[3] While Watson was not "submerged" it is certainly true that his works depended on the actor and director for an arresting interpretation on stage.

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* Interview, October 16, 1982

Watson's plays were too word-bound for the visually dominated consciousness of the time. Watson said himself (in the "Preface: On Radical Absurdity") that the printed word no longer "unifies" the conscious mind; twentieth-century man enjoys "many modes of consciousness."[4] While his plays try to explore these various modes, they are still strongly rooted in a literary tradition. Watson's plays are an attempt to portray that new "eccentric" man, and thus to emulate his language. He seems at odds, then, with some of the major theatre movements of the sixties which tried to abandon speech as a major factor in interpretation. However, while Watson's plays rely on the spoken word, they also rely on a spirited spontaneity and inhibition--essential characteristics of other sixties theatre forms.

What follows are analyses of six of Watson's plays, three of which were produced at Studio Theatre, two at Yardbird and one which went into rehearsal at Yardbird but was never given a public performance. From these analyses, it is hoped that an realization of how Watson put some of his theories into practice will emerge.

To begin with, there is Cockrow and the Gulls, some aspects of which have already been discussed. The controversy around the play remains unresolved; the Journal critic made some valid points, but so did those who protested his review. The Journal critic reported that he saw a play with no plot, skimpy characters, too many words, and too little sense. But there were others in the audience who wrote in protest to the Journal, who saw allegory and symbolism, who heard poetry in the over-abundance of words, who recognized absurdist themes and a morality play structure.

However, if one does not know what allegory is, and if one concludes that a morality play is a melodrama with a moral at the end, then this play is as confusing as ever. The letters to the Editor were mostly instructive, telling Journal readers just what an allegory is and defining the symbolism in the play. Mr. Bill's review raised the question, "what happened in this play?" Those who responded did not answer that question. The question they answered instead was, "what does it all stand for?" With Cockrow's absurdist nature, the answer to that question could well be "nothing," for the absurdist theme in Cockrow states that even in death the answers to life cannot be found. Our absurd predicament is that we are born only to die. If death is our "goal," then, says Cockrow, what is it like? But he finds no answers. His death is much like his drunken, frustrating life: miserable, in fact, with few rewards. Death is merely a continuation of life, he discovers.

In a typical allegory, an Everyman figure is met at the moment of death by allegorical figures representing life's virtues and vices. By acknowledging his sins, repenting them, and embracing the virtues, Everyman finds salvation and a happy eternal life. Some of these elements are to be found in Cockrow, with a few twists.

The Everyman figure is Cockrow. What makes him typical of mankind is his quest for truth. Like man, though, this quest is futile. It even costs him his job at the university. Thwarted again in his search for truth, he seeks solace in drunkenness at a brothel. He wishes he were dead, and makes a vow to visit death and come back to tell what it is like. An Angel grants his wish for death and Act I ends with him about to drink himself "to death."

The allegorical figures accompanying Cockrow are O'Reilly, Alice, Higgins, and Cyril. The play achieves an episodic structure, presenting each character in isolation from the others. The only thread tying them together is the brothel locale, their association with Cockrow, and a mutual misery. Their lives are all sordid, full of discontent and dissatisfaction.

Cyril is the first one we meet. He is a pathetic creature, wandering around with a pot of geraniums, searching for his father (Higgins), making stammering attempts to assert himself. He is no match for his father's aggressive, violent nature. His father is a would-be politician full of dreams and schemes, bullying everyone around him. In his quest to "find" his father, Cyril is egged on by Pride. Pride smiles with satisfaction when Higgins murders, and smiles again when Cyril matches his father by murdering a number of people, including himself.

O'Reilly is a defrocked priest living off the avails of prostitution, lusting after the prostitute Alice. They play a game of cat-and mouse, making phony sacrifices, Alice giving up sex for religion and requiring the same of O'Reilly, a sacrifice which, in a total contradiction, will allow him to have sex with her.

Cyril pushes them all to the judgement seat, where they are pronounced "filthy" in a mock trial. When they blame the environment for the way they are, God is declared the culprit because he created the environment.

This moment, with the characters all dead and their afterlife on display, is a pivotal point in the play.

When Watson wrote about Cockrow, he said it was this reassemblage of characters after life which was his goal. In their afterlife, they are still in a predicament and still have no answers. They still want to blame someone for the way things are, unable to see that they have created their own predicament. There is no escape. Cockrow tries to hang himself, not realizing he is already dead. It is a never-ending cycle, says Higgins:

> . . . a man's will is infinite/And if he pits it against his own nature/In that very act he manufactures his own private hell,/And as that hell increases, so increases his will. . . .[5]

Cockrow barely gets a chance to tell what death's experience is, what with Iris's highly-romanticized version, passed on from her mother, and the interjections of the others. And when he does speak, he is stymied, and can only say, "Give me a drink." (45) Even when Mr. Boswell appears, inviting him to sample the wonders of the world, he stays behind to pour drinks for his cronies. As Boswell says, "they die the sort of death they lived in life." (47)

For these characters, death is a continuation of life. Watson poses them in a chaotic situation, kills them off, then reassembles them in the same kind of chaos from which they are unable to extricate themselves. There is a moment of judgement, at which they all panic. They are unable to comprehend what is happening to them. In a highly ritualized scene, they are marionettes of the Five Sins:

> Pride. This man thinks hell would be fit for a king.
> (gives Higgins a shove)
> Sloth. This one spent his money on drink and whores
> When I had nothing to eat. [meaning Cockrow]
> Envy. This holy Father (pushes O'Reilly) said his
> prayers in bed.
> Lechery. This whore knots her legs round a priest.
> (pushes Alice)
> Wrath. We'll drag them all up to the judgement
> seat. (57)

At this moment of reckoning, Boswell appears once more to lure them away, and Higgins follows. Ever the entrepreneur, Higgins intends to seize this last opportunity to achieve political power, or at least to sample the good life with a minimum of effort.

Just when things seem most chaotic the prostitutes return, freed from their misery and moral destitution by the pearl given them by the mysterious shepherd. The pearl wards off an attack of the sins upon Alice, and causes her to make an act of contrition, crying out, "What have I done?"

She passes it on to O'Reilly, from whom it evokes a confession of unworthiness. O'Reilly places the pearl in Cockrow's mouth, and he is made free of the hanging ropes (and perhaps symbolically of his self-destructive death-wish). When the pearl is passed over to Cyril, he is once more able to see, symbolically able to acknowledge the wrong he has done, which is what the pearl has brought about in all the others as well.

This acknowledgement of wrongdoing puts the play securely in the morality play tradition, in which the sinful ways of man are made know to him, and the necessity of his confession made evident. Still, the gift of the pearl is a rather sudden and arbitrary ending to the misery of the characters. Their knowledge is imposed upon them by the pearl; it is not generated from within them. Until that gift is granted, the play is therefore very much a twentieth-century morality play, in which it is made evident that death is a continuation of life, full of the same puzzling predicaments. As Watson comments, "even when you are dead, you cannot die."[6] Life is essentially meaningless. We live in a meaningless state, of which even in death we are not relieved.

The later plays of Watson are not as allegorical as Cockrow, but the element of ritual is sustained and even heightened. Watson obviously liked assembling characters in a kind of limbo, for in each of his ensuing plays the environment becomes less and less realistic and recognizable.

This synopsis makes a very complex play seem very simple and makes obtuse symbols seem very clear. It is an attempt to show how much Watson's play is in the tradition of absurdism and existentialism, and how he has borrowed from Medieval traditions to convey these twentieth century messages. The message was lost to many though, because the vehicle used to convey it was too heavily laden with difficult language and a tangle of confusing characters.

At this point Watson's plays were not yet haunted by "McLuhanisms." This work is rooted in absurdism.

In an interview, Watson talked about his involvement with theatre and mentioned spending time in Paris in the early 1950's, when the absurdist movement was thriving and the plays of Samuel Beckett were receiving attention. Excited by absurdist themes and plays, back at the University of Alberta he directed a production of Ionesco's The Bald Soprano in 1955 as part of a one-act play festival. He remarks with pride that it won the competition. His affinity for aburdist themes and style was evident from that time, and it is no wonder that his plays can be categorized with the absurdist school.

Wail for Two Pedestals is similar to Cockrow in that it kills characters off and then reassembles them in the afterlife. It is not as satirical as Cockrow but deals with social issues, most notably the potential devastation of the atomic bomb. Along the way it deals with our youth-oriented, sexually permissive society.

The play is a play upon words. Taking the titles of two plays, Waiting for Lefty by Clifford Odets and Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett, Watson uses the characters of Lefty (the 13-year-old daughter of the title character) and Godot as his central figures. In the original plays, the characters wait for Lefty and Godot, who never appear. Both plays are concerned with that aspect of man which sees him waiting forever for things to be set aright, either by a person, a god, or a more fortunate twist of fate. What man never seems to learn is that this day, this moment, this set of circumstances is the one we must live for. Paradise will never be regained.

In Wail for Two Pedestals the figures of salvation (if one might call them that) have come. Godot sits upon the pedestal Vladimir and Estragon erected for him. Lefty has come and gone. His offspring remains. The play takes place in a time when what we have been waiting for is here--the world's being set aright. In fact, we are beyond that time. Watson describes it as a time "just before the atomic bomb-button is pressed that is to say in the nick of time ergo more or less today as it tomorrows into the past."[7] (63)

And what do we discover? That things are worse than ever. Chaos, futility, hopelessness, boredom and confusion reign.

The world in Wail is Watson's artistic interpretation of twentieth century life. It encompasses some of the theories he shares with Wyndham Lewis and Marshall McLuhan.

Cockrow and the Gulls by comparison is a play based on older traditions, a play bound by convention. In Let's Murder Clytemnestra According to the Principles of Marshall McLuhan, one of the characters mentions "the two chief principles of contemporary mini-art, repetition and duration."[8] These principles govern the structure of Wail for Two Pedestals.

It is a product of the vorticist theory, with much repetion in the chant-like dialogue. The play takes on a machine-like character, hammering away, going through the same repetitive motions but being in constant motion and making a constant noise. Watson said, "These two pedestals enable me to whirl around them a large number of contemporary environments,"[9] thereby identifying it as a vorticist work of art.

Its themes are "McLuhan-esque." It deals with our society of icons, where technology is worshipped and essential to our existence. Hardly a line goes by in the dialogue where a name is not droped. Allen Ginsberg, Charlie Chaplin, Ferlinghetti, the Fathers of Confederation, Alice in Wonderland--all are mentioned, along with many more. The cliches in our lives--technology and fame--are heralded.

The vorticist and McLuhanesque theories give the play its form, but its content is still rooted in absurdism. For all the commotion, nothing happens. Everyone laments the state they are in, and wishes to be in a different one. The old "wail" to be young; the living "wail" to be unborn and unconceived.

This is the surrealistic world inhabited by Godot, Lefty, mama Lolita, Winnie, and the four chorus members. Godot sits immobile and silent for the most part in Acts I and II, while the others whirl around him. Acts I and II depict the chaotic world on the verge of destruction. They "wail" for all to be set aright on the Judgement Day. When that day comes in Act III and Godot comes down from his pedestal, it is a colossal disappointment. To rolls of thunder signalling the end to come, the chorus proclaims in Act I, "We are the hollow men." When the world ends in Act III, it is not with a bang but a whimper. "You mean that is the last trump?" [III.i.84] one of the chorus members asks, and Godot, whom we can assume is God, is a big disappointment as well. He is not the stern omnipotent father figure one might expect. He would even surprise and disappoint the most cynical non-believers. He says:

> . . . the real laugh
> will be on the poor
> theatre of the absurd
> types when they discover
> I am a thousand times
> more absurd than they
> thought they were! [III.ii.85]

To build to this grand crescendo (which is really a pianissimo) Watson contrives three acts, each with a theme of its own. The play is structured like a religious ceremony, with different chants describing the action of various scenes.

Act I, scenes i and ii might be termed the "wailing" scenes; Act I, scene iii the "holy" scene (like the "sanctus" of a mass); and Act I, scene iv a love cry which crescendoes into the roll of thunder and an earthquake. It is "the eye of the storm."

Act II, scene i sees the action through the quiet after the storm, into the darkness at day's end. It comprises a sacred rite: the seduction of Lefty. It is the "'Fall down Sun'" scene and is followed by the trumpet call.

Act III, scene i shows them wailing for Godot. Now that the world has ended they await his judgement on mankind. The chant is "Lord have mercy upon us." [p.84]

Act III, scene ii is the frustrated cry of damnation, or "To hell with hell," as the chorus demands Godot's judgement upon all the perpetrators of atrocities throughout eternity. There is even an "Our Father" in this section of the mock mass. They are damned to repetition, to live their lives over and over again. After this realization, they manage an "Alleluia" and a "Peace be unto you." But until they reach this blessed state much happens to them.

Act I establishes the wailing theme. Can the word "waiting" be substituted for "wailing", or is wailing used in its real sense, as in lamentation? Watson is being playful, and there is a play on the wailing/waiting pair, but the act is more of a lamentation, a collection of characters crying out in agony, mourning for what is lost or has never been.

There is an ode to electric gadgets in Act I, scene ii, in which the chorus claims that the audience ("they") are "wailing" for the removal of all this gadgetry because "they're fed up." [67] Then there is a short interchange between Godot and Lefty in which the characters "wail" for love. These are the two pedestals around which the play's action swirls: one the idol of the complicated, many-headed, many-limbed, many-eyed monster of technology which will bring man's damnation; the other the idol of love with its warmth and simplicity, which is man's salvation.

Lefty represents the love pedestal. She describes herself as "all feeling" and once the chorus assures her she is Lefty, she makes the declaration:

> I am wailing
> for eternity
> and I am
> wailing to see Godot. [I.ii.69]

Her simplicity is contrasted by the attributes of the other characters, Winnie in particular who claims,

> . . . I am wailing
> for the Russians
> to take time by the
> scruff of its scruffy
> neck and wash its
> dirty face and invent a
> new geriatric pill
> and I am wailing
> for mama Lolita to
> grow young again! [ibid]

Lefty's sentimentalism is constantly contradicted by the others' cynicism.

The chorus is particularly futile. They describe themselves as "the conscience of mankind" [I.ii.71] and claim that through citizen action they will bring world peace and restore Winnie and mama Lolita's youth. But as one of their members says, they act "like a committee" [I.ii.72] and accomplish nothing.

Finally they wail, or rail, against pedestals themselves. We keep putting up pedestals, they imply, upon which we set gods. Those gods will supposedly set everything aright; all we need do is sit and wait for the day of reckoning.

With the day of reckoning at hand, the characters pick up a desperate cry of "holyholyholyholyholy." [I.iii.73] This is the Sanctus of the mass, where everything is praised as being holy. It is an unrelenting chant, which continues to the play's end. Virtually everything is praised as being holy. Smoke, smog, the Social Credit government, bucket seats, hula dancers, and the highland fling are branded holy. Lefty interrupts these ludicrous claims with the persistent claim that her love is holy. As Lefty's love cry grows more insistent, so does the chorus' cry of holiness, ending with "The long distance call from the Pentagon is holy," and we sense that the end is near; the phone call that will set off the world's last nuclear holocaust is imminent.

The impending doom and the impending coupling of Lefty and Godot are parallel lines of action in the play. Like the two pedestals, one symbolizes death and destruction, the other hope.

Act I, scene iv, begins with a love ballad between Lefty and Godot. The act of consumating their love becomes the goal of the scene's action, and as achieving that goal gets closer, the thunder starts to roll and the earth to shake, signalling the peril in which the world finds itself. Winnie has "automated" himself with a pistol and is slightly trigger-happy, on the verge of shooting everything in sight. He suspects everything, even his mother's voice--"Perhaps it's a decoy" he says [I.iv.75]. Godot's comment upon this armed surveillance is:

> . . . as the command
> I have given
> the archangel-in-chief
> Michael not to put
> his trumpet-happy
> up to the mouthpiece
> of the trumpet
> until the finger
> starts reaching
> for the button! [I.iv.75]

Winnie's readiness to destroy is symbolic of the greater urgency at hand. Mama Lolita begs him not to transgress, and urges him to think of God and try to pray. He taunts her to show him God, or for God to show himself. ¶

Godot is standing before him, with Lefty, and they perform the ceremony of checking into a hotel for the night. To the ever-increasing sounds of thunder, Lolita begs him to insist on seeing a marriage license. As the chorus chants, "here we go round the eye of the storm," [I.iv.78] a masque is presented in which is portrayed a woman who wants to die because she actually loves her husband and believes she is guilty of a sin of the flesh. With the storm at its peak, Godot cries out, "My love is holy." [I.iv.79]

That storm was just a warning of the apocalypse to come, just as checking into a hotel is merely the preamble to the consummation of Lefty and Godot's love. In the scene which follows (Act II, scene i), Godot and Lefty finally come down from their pedestals and being their love-making. The theme they hum is "'Fall down sun, fall down sun./Burn out the sky, switch off the day . . . .'" [II.i.82] In the holy darkness they can consummate their love, and in the calamity caused by the sun falling down from the sky, the rioting which is this world's demise commences.

As explained in Act II, scene ii, the rioting which brings the world's end is caused by automation. The workers have been rioting because they have been displaced by automation. The managers have delivered an ultimatum:

> Either the rioters
> surrender themselves
> in certain designated
> disposal areas before
> sunrise or they the
> managers will use
> their atomic weapons
> to restore order. . . [II.ii.82]

"We will be blown to bits" says mama Lolita. The last trumpet call is heard as Godot promises he will take care of them all.

One of the many themes in this play is that we are a button-push away from atomic destruction. It is a consistent theme in Watson's plays. The technology which has brought civilization so far in so short a time has the potential to bring about its destruction. In a later play, Let's Murder Clytemnestra According to the Principles of Marshall McLuhan, man has turned technology onto himself. An automatic rifle or an atomic bomb is outside of man; genetic and chemical engineering produce weapons by which man can control the chromosal structure which is the blueprint of his existence. If he does not clone himself as a means of manufacturing the "perfect" man, he will at least destroy himself by ingesting one of the many poisonous chemicals he has invented (supposedly as an aid to his existence).

In "Let's Murder . . ." the drug PSI is touted as a cure-all and an elixir from the fountain of youth; it destroys the characters. The seeds of that play, written in 1967, are germinating in Wail for Two Pedestals, where technology is destroying mankind in a less subtle way.

The apocalypse has been prophesized for two thousand years. Painters, poets, and playwrights have tried to imagine what it and its aftermath would be like. Wilfred Watson joins that illustrious company. His vision is an existential one. After the supposed end of life as they know it, the characters of Wail for Two Pedestals find that they are doomed to pick up where they left off and carry on in the same way.

Even while the trumpet call is still being played, their disappointment sets in. They long to see and hear

Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti and Dylan Thomas again, 20th century prophets of doom and atomic catastrophy. They expect a gathering of all souls in this afterlife; instead they are in the same company as before. The "beep beep" of the trumpet is enough of a letdown, but not to have Samuel Beckett explain who Godot is, or even to meet one's favourite aunt, is enough to leave one inconsolable.

"I am Godot" says Godot, as if to say "This is it. This is all there is." The characters are indignant at such a poor display on the Judgement Day, each voicing his objections. "It certainly won't reach the dead" says one of them, referring to the anemic trumpet call. [III.i.84] They soon realize their transgression, if not their rudeness, and beg, "Lord have mercy upon us," followed by a rendition of "For he's a jolly good fellow" for Godot's sake. [ibid]

Abandoned by everyone, Godot finds comfort in the faithful companionship of Lefty. Ever the romantic, she loves him for no reason, and demands nothing from him, not even a reckoning such as the others demand.

As in Cockrow, a trial begins, in which man (or god) in the afterlife must account for his actions in the previous life. Godot knows what they are after, summing it up succinctly:

> What you are wailing
> for
>   is for me to come
> down and get into
> the prisoner's dock
> and you are wailing

> for me to be tried
> before a jury of
> your peers and equals
> and for me to be
> found guilty of
> letting you and your
> kind make things into
> a mess, and you are
> wailing for me to be
> liquidated into tiny
> drops of soft rain
> and fall pitter patter
> drip drip drip drop
> into the bottomless abysm
> so that your idea of
> the universe can go
> on its mindless way
> cleanly and efficiently
> to the mutual benefit
> of those present? [III.ii.87]

The chorus demands that justice be served, that the atrocities committed in the name of Christianity, that the misdeeds done to American negroes, that the genocide committed by Hitler and the German people be condemned. Instead Godot tells the chorus to go to hell. To him damnation means nothing. It is another cliché of no substance. He is not even certain hell works. Perhaps it is just a concoction of the media; perhaps only Marshall McLuhan could explain why it does not work. Just when the chorus had counted on sending Hitler to hell, Godot disappoints them. The world does not exist, therefore radio (the means by which the world tuned into the voice of Hitler) does not exist, therefore Hitler does not exist. Furthermore, says Godot, the world has not completely come to an end yet:

> But it's coming to an end,
> and when it does, you won't
> have any means to be lethal, and
> so you won't feel murderous. [III.ii.88]

To punctuate this revelation, Winnie and Lefty offer a McLuhanesque Our Father:

> W: Our blather which art in heaven.
> L: Hello the telephone.
> W: Thine is the telecom.
> L: Thine is the television.
> W: Give us this day
> our daily programme.
> L: Forgive us the atomic bomb.
> W: As we forgive those who use
> nerve gasoline.
> Amen. [ibid, p. 89]

A chorus member asks, "Does this mean we go on living our lives over and over again?" [III.ii.89] That would appear to be their destiny. It is a damnation to them, and they lodge a formal complaint that the world's end has been "mismanaged and the entire transaction/completely irregular!" [ibid, p. 89] Godot is oblivious to them now. All that remains is for him to finally wed Lefty. "My embrace is holy" are his final words. [III.ii.91]

He leaves the rest of the characters to experience a sort of rebirth, one tainted with a sense of resignation. The last moments of the play belong to mama Lolita, who most feared the world's end, and who least wanted the consummation of Godot and Lefty's love. Referring to the world now ended she says, "I don't miss it much. . . . There always was something happening to it, to take the joy out of things." [III.ii.90]

If the holy figure of Godot can succumb to worldly temptations, then nothing is sacred to her any more. She is reborn with a greater sense of self-fulfillment:

> . . . I am someone
> else, Winnie
> The someone else I
> should have been
> If I hadn't been
> myself, Winnie dear! [III.ii.91]

They have all come to the awareness that, as the chorus says, "Progress is holy/but it's completely meaningless!" [III.ii.91] They resign themselves to the fact that this catastrophic moment in their lives was not the end of the road, but merely a detour. This supposed cataclysm was simply an inconvenience.

Having experienced the sense of social action which characterized the sixties, with attention outward towards the preservation of mankind, they enter a new life (or continue the old) with the attitude of the seventies. That attitude is one of turning inward, or finding a new, supposedly healthy, selfishness. From the communal spirit of the sixties, they move into the self-centred spirit of the seventies, its slogan voiced by mama Lolita:

> What right
> have you to be
> sharing my confidences? [III.ii.92]

Social action is futile so one might as well "look out for number one."

In Wail for Two Pedestals, Watson's burgeoning satire is evident, but it is still inspecific. It is general condemnation of society, castigating literary figures with abandon. In the plays which followed he took specific aim at recognizable public figures in familiar locales.

One of Watson's most light-hearted and bitingly satirical works is Chez Vous, Comfortable Pew, which was written in 1965 and played at the Yardbird in May, 1965, to be revived at the Embers in September, 1965.

The satire is quite specific here. The play is set in Edmonton and is about Edmontonians. There is a highly satirical treatment of the premier of Alberta, Ernest Manning. One of the characters is Bud Demure, who is described as a "cultural Robin Hood."[10]

The play received a warmer welcome than others, and audiences found it delightful, probably because it is, first and foremost, a review. It has a lighter touch than the other plays and stresses the satire. It messages are relayed through satire, and the messages seem inconsequential compared to the fun that is had.

Watson wanted to write satire to celebrate the new freedoms of the theatre. Therefore he is enjoying himself with this play and is not trying to be serious or as self-important as in some of the others. An audience is allowed to do what it does most comfortably: sit back and enjoy, without having to think too hard.

Although it is frustrating to be living in this so-called deaf universe, we continue to stumble along, refusing to see ourselves as the fools we are. This appears to be Watson's point of view. Too often in reading, hearing, or performing Watson's works, only the voice which says "life is cruel" is listened to.

Thus the humour in Chez Vous is refreshing. The lighter side is dominant in this work which is an unleashed satire upon Edmonton as a prime example of Canada's complacent affluent society. Edmonton is where "everyone owns/an oilwell or two!" and "Everyone is filthy rich." [p.1]

Pierre Berton's The Comfortable Pew, published in 1965, castigated this complacency, particularly in the protestant churches of Canada. Church pews had become too "comfortable," he said. The church afforded an escape for its members, a place where they could avoid confrontation with controversial issues. As "John Buttocks," one of the characters in Watson's plays, says, Berton's book is:

> The first time that someone has told the church of its default with respect to reform, war, nuclear war, the colour bar, good business, pre-packaged morality, national creeds, the ecclesiastical caste system, the comfortable pew, the lukewarm pulpit, the rejection of 20th century media, the need for faith without dogma. [p.18]

In Chez Vous the comfortable pew is an icon which is taken quite literally. The society is so complacent that the foam rubber business is booming, making foam slabs to cover hard benches all across Canada.

"John Buttocks" is in a quandry because by day he sells those foam cushions, encouraging the "comfortable pew" trade, and by night he stands on street corners plying copies of The Comfortable Pew, which condemns the cushioned-seat industry, being a "dastardly attack on the foam rubber slab attitude in the churches." [p. 3]

Parading around this basic theme are a host of caricatures, none of them there to further any plot, all of them there to poke fun at public figures and "John Doe" alike. John Buttocks and Al Backside work for Rubber Canada, which is doing a thriving business in Edmonton, where there is plenty of wealth, where "the good life" and complacency abound.

Together Backside and Buttocks perform a duet based on the foam rubber theme, advertising their latest campaign to infiltrate the churches through the Sunday schools. By getting the adults to buy foam rubber for the "tender little children's tender little bottoms," they will soon corner the adult market as well.

Enter "Mother Garbage" who represents "Northbanks Sunday School committee for the improvement of Sunday schools," [p. 14] the Northbanks Sunday School being the one with the "high domed roof" located "just on the north side of the High Level Bridge." [p.15] Mother Garbage likes to run the Sunday School like a provincial legislature. Her first name is Ernestina and Al Backside finds her at times "unmanning." [p.16] She wants foam rubber slabs for the Northbanks

Sunday Schools, of course.

The object of the two salesmen's leering and drooling is Judy Domm, who has been hired by the Defence Department to dig a ditch across Canada. The purpose of this ditch is to frighten young men into universities. As long as there are ditches to be dug young men will rush into university to avoid being ditch diggers. Judy Domm has been contracted to provide motivation for them. There are plenty of gibes at the universities. According to Backside they were a "push-over for foam rubber." [p.7]

Judy Domm was refused entrance to university because she didn't look as if she had an IQ. As Buttocks explains, "You don't need a very high IQ to get into the U but you do need to look as if you had an IQ. She looks stupid." [p.14] And as Ms. Domm's project proves, most people attend university only to avoid that horrible occupation of ditch digger.

Commenting on all the proceedings is "Bud Demure." He spouts some catchy rhythmic poetry and limericks, and has a long soliloquy near the play's end. His plan is to have the Canadian government present the cross-Canada ditch as a gift to the people of Canada to commemorate the Centennial. He says, "What do we need as Canadians, more than a place to go to, where we can discover our identities?" [p.38]

There is a long argument over the ditch, and then a complicated and quick ending. The curtain falls with Ernestina proclaiming she will be vindicated on the Judgement Day. If the play has been a departure from Watson's favourite theme of judgement after death, it pays homage to this theme in the final soliloquy.

If Cockrow was born of the school of absurdism, then O holy ghost, DIP YOUR FINGER IN THE BLOOD OF CANADA, and write, I LOVE YOU (shortened to DIP by the company) was born of the school of protest, of tuning in and dropping out, of hippies and psychedelia, of the birth control pill. Here Watson's theories about McLuhanism and Wyndham Lewis have an effect on his work. It is a play in the sixties style insofar as it is highly ritualized and the conventional use of the word is abandoned for chanting, poetry, and song. Indeed, the success of the production at Studio Theatre was due to a highly electronic, visually oriented production. The entire theatre was converted into an environment for the play, with the seats removed and replaced by mats and backrests. Images were projected onto nine screens throughout the presentation, and special music was composed by Anne Burrows.

It is a highly topical play, dealing indirectly with the United States' involvement in Viet Nam. It only deals with these subjects; it is not about them. Generally speaking, it is about a society split by two groups, and is loosely based on the 1960's struggle between the Establishment and the counter-culture.

The villain, and leader of the Establishment, is Richard Sunflower, whose appearance is delayed for several scenes, but whose significance is established with the opening chant, "Let's kill Richard Sunflower."[11] He is blamed for everything that is wrong with society, most notably U.S. involvement in Viet Nam. His final act of damnation is to buy the U.S., hence all its power, and all its evil. This brings about his death. The theory is that if Canada owns the U.S. it owns the war and therefore can end it, which Sunflower would never do, so he must die. However, the powers that overtake him sell the U.S. back instead of using its inherent power to rescue Canada from its problems.

The play ends underlining the contradictory nature of society. The "pro-peace" figures who overtake Sunflower use means as nefarious as his to establish themselves, and end up turning against each other. Anti-violent, they resort to throwing stones at each other in the name of love. The final contradiction is their invention of a "psychedelic air rifle" which is clean, silent, and modern; one means of destruction is simply traded for another. How prophetic Watson was, to see that the free-spirited, anti-materialistic hippies of the sixties would become the stockbrokers of the eighties.

In his plays, Watson tries to deal with the general, not the specific. That is why in Cockrow, for example, he imitates allegory. While DIP similarly deals with character types, it is not allegory. The characters are soul-less and even cardboard-like. The situations with which they are involved are atypical and unspecific. The plays describe a condition more than a set of circumstances. In Cockrow the set of circumstances is the chaos of life and its inherent meaningless. In DIP it is power struggles, or the absurd nature of man's attitude towards his fellow man. How can a generation of self-proclaimed pacifists and peacemakers, the play asks, be responsible for mass genocide and involve itself in a continual struggle for power?

Some of McLuhan's theories, and some aspects of vorticism, shape this play. First of all, the idea of man encompassing many modes of consciousness helps to explain Watson's use of the Chorus in his plays. In DIP the "characters" are referred to as M1 (for Male-1), F2, etc., and each member plays many roles. They share an attitude of indifference, slipping in and out of roles, chanting lines, repeating phrases. They have an emotionless quality, lacking sentiment, prohibiting emotional ties with the audience, a quality vorticism proclaims. It also champions multi-consciousness, with many things happening at once, all to indicate the essential centre around which they swirl.

Essential to the portrayal of this multi-consciousness is a multi-environment. Thus all the plays, and especially DIP, are particularly fluid, moving in and out of settings. Environment is determined by clichéd speech, each setting having its own jargon. Soldiers in the Viet Nam jungle talk like soldiers, particularly their commander, who shouts out orders without pause. In the next moment the play is back in a hippie commune, with the speech cluttered by clichés about making love, not war. Later, Robert and Roger Sunflower find themselves making a business deal, and the speech echoes an executive boardroom.

The ultimate spook of our clichéd language occurs in the case of Mrs. Endaria, whose eyes are removed to replace those of a blind girl. She need not worry, though, because hers will be replaced by the eyes of the newspaper, for "thousands of people see by means of newspaper eyes." Once she is granted this gift, she is a talking newspaper. When asked "What can you see?" she replies, "We can see very clearly that this galloping inflation must be stopped." Poor Mrs. Endaria is typical of Watson's characters who appear for no other reason than to make a satirical point. However, we do speak to each other in clichés, using the jargon applicable to a particular environment. Watson is merely using the dramatic technique of heightened speech, taking what is realistic and exaggerating it.

By the time he wrote Let's Murder Clytemnestra According To The Principles of Marshall McLuhan in 1969, Watson was satirizing the theories that fascinated him. The play pokes bitter fun at McLuhan, unleashing a brutal series of one-liners at all kinds of "isms," McLuhanisms included. As is always true of satire, however, there is some truth underlying it. The director, Bernard Engel, described the play as:

> an attempt to probe the age when Man, instead of extending himself by the media and electronic technologies, refashions his body by means of chemico-surgical tampering with the human genetic systemry. 12

In an age of test-tube babies, an age where "clone" is an over-used word in the vocabulary, Watson's themes have once again proven to be prophetic.

The earlier description of Clytemnestra (in Chapter IV) concentrated on the significance of the electronic media in its production. However, it can be analysed in a more literary fashion. Watson's dialogue does articulate some important themes. One of the themes is that media become senses of their own, not extensions of the senses which already exist. Thus the cameras were used as integral parts of the action, not as special effects to enhance it. They became new sets of eyes for the audience members. The play is also about man's new-found ability to re-fashion himself by chemical means. In the play, when all else has failed, the magical drug PIAI is administered to cure all ills, especially the large-scale sociological ones. During the sixties, science and especially medical science was seen as a modern-day messiah. Drugs were seen as cure-alls for any ill, and were used to enhance life, not escape from it. They were a friendly addition to everyday life, and a lot of faith was put in their inventors. Watson is satirizing this blind faith in science.

The play is also a satirical treatment of our penchant for proclaiming trends as harbingers of "The Age of This" or "The Age of That." Things have gotten so far out of hand that particular "ages" are labelled and then the society assumes the characteristics of that era. The people in Clytemnestra are in the "Age of Charisma" in which garbage becomes art and, as one citizen says, "All my feelings are flowers."[13] In other words, everything is art and everything is beautiful--the credo of the sixties.

Acknowledging one of the gods of pop culture, Watson describes one of his central characters, Electra (a god of Greek culture) as looking like a very old woman made up to represent John Lennon. Watson felt that much of sixties psychology did not so much reveal truth and champion honesty as a path to freedom, understanding, and world peace, as it clothed what was ugly in beautiful garb, or labelled it art, or hid violent expression under a cloak of euphemisms. "They aren't prisoners but patients" says one of the hippie characters of an innocent soul being subjected to the PIAI treatment.

Garbage is garbage but the characters in Clytemnestra's Age of Charisma society would simply label it art and thereby beautify it, neglecting the fact that it still smells and is an eyesore, the tailings of an over-productive, all-consuming materialistic society.

In the Greek myth Electra murders her mother Clytemnestra, seeking revenge for her sister's sacrificial death and her father's downfall. The modern-day John Lennon/Electra is out to murder Clytemnestra in a McLuhanesque fashion: through technology. The play's designer Norman Yates describes how Watson was fascinated by the "human-ness" of Greek mythological characters: gods destroyed in their intensity to be human.* As well, they are archetypes. Anyone who has ever murdered a family member is embodied in Electra. She is murder itself, given human characteristics. It follows that in this play she represents man's mis-use of technology to murder his global family.

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* Interview, 29 September 1983

Watson says Over Prairie Trails was his attempt to define the tragic farce. The horses, the play's principle characters, are victims, reined-in slaves who are unheard in a deaf universe. The play was written in 1965 and was ready to be performed in 1970, but Watson notes with chagrin how Trudeau, also a character in the play, changed everything by "marrying Margaret."*

The play is a satire, or treatment, of Over Prairie Trails by F.P. Grove, published in 1922. The book is Grove's description of several trips he made over the Manitoba prairie during a year in which he took a job that separated him from his wife and daughter.

In his Preface: On Radical Absurdity, Watson described the play as his attempt to define the cosmic fallacy, which is described in the play as the belief "that the tragic affairs of horses and men have cosmic significance . . . . That the stars have eyes."[14] Watson defines satire as castigating "the crossing of territorial lines."[15] This play crosses the line between fantasy and reality by giving the horses voices. Within the play, the horses cross sacred boundaries by assuming they have a right to freedom.

In the book, the horses ("Dan" and "Peter") dutifully plow through horrible conditions, making their way through atrocities such as fog and snow. They are slaves and it is expected of them to obey their master. The writer makes it clear how important it is for him to be in control. The horses are poor, dumb animals.

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* Interview, October 16, 1982

In Watson's play they have graduated to the point where they at least have voices which are heard by the audience. They are characterized as working-class individuals with minds of their own. Their goal is to become masters over their slave driver by doing away with him.

In the book the labour of the horses is seen as obedience; in the play it is seen as torture.

The master in the book is a hard-working school teacher who has been separated from his wife and child and makes a weekly trip home to them. The book describes his observances along the way. Grove's is a detailed description of the nature he encounters. Nature is seen as a beautiful devine force, even when it tries to sabotage his stubborn effort to make his way home to his family. He observes the countryside, the animal life, the stars, the machinations of fog, and the configurations of drifted snow, with an observant naturalist's eye, but also with spiritual awe and reverance for the wonder of it all. His is a scientist's vision, with an eye for detail.

Watson sees the same setting with a satirist's eye. He pokes fun at certain clichés of the Canadian lifestyle, notably our reverence for the prairie and our obsession with the weather. Another cliché he takes a stab at is the all Canadian male circa 1916: hardy, of the pioneering spirit, undaunted by the severity of the prairie landscape and the harshness of its winter. Grove conquers all in his weekly quest to return to the home fires, most significantly maintaining control over his team of horses.

The all-Canadian male in Watson's play is Pierre Trudeau, who makes a weekly trip to Manitoba to visit his mistress. The hero of this play only thinks he is control of everything. The audience hears the voice of those he thinks he is controlling, and learns that he is not so much in control of them as he is merely an authoritarian. Grove, the hero in his own novel, revels in his conquest of nature. Trudeau, in Watson's play, maintains a dictatorial, but tenuous, hold on the circumstances.

Watson delights in slaughtering sacred cows. The novel, in style and in content, is a model of Canadian decency and old-fashioned pedantry. Watson mocks this style and the stuffy narrow mindedness it represents. He mimics Grove's style in one of Trudeau's speeches, for example:

> Being without reason, they were without real awareness of their tragic and absurd predicament. I suffered for them more than they suffered for themselves. Just as I suffer for most mankind, who though they have reason, don't or won't use it, or are in no position to use it, if they have it. [p.50, sc. 6]

Immediately following this speech is an exchange between Peter and Danny in which they plot to break away from their master and do him in. This juxtaposition is typical of the play.

Grove never considers that the horses have rights of any kind; he assumes they are meant to be trained into submission and obedience. Watson recognizes their rights and acknowledges their feelings. Their struggle is in vain, because ultimately Trudeau remains the master. The play ends with Lotte (the PM's mistress), the PM, Daniel and Peter stranded on top of a drifted-over fence, the horses helpless, the reins tangled, but the PM still holding the whip and trying to beat them into obedience.

The political satire revolves around the PM's unflinching control over his "slaves." Even though his subjects grumble and complain, plotting to overthrow him, he remains in control. His attitude is arrogant and condescending. He considers them stupid animals for whom he is doing a favour:

> their fate was much more splendid than the fate of pet ponies blindly toiling in the bowels of the earth. [p.50, sc.6]

This he says as the horses march through the snow with precision goose-stepping.

The comparison to a dictator is obvious. The PM appears as Hitler in a dream sequence, and like a dictator, he is oblivious to the will of his subjects. The PM reflects:

> I no longer had to think about the horses, we operated together as if we were one will, one mind, one soul, one exceedingly strong body, [p.54]

while the horses to decide to "twist the cutter around his neck." [p.54] Contrary to what the PM thinks, their wills are on a collision course. But in this instance, as in all the instances, the PM gains control through sheer physical force; Peter and Danny are defeated and they resign themselves to a life of cursing their master while they pull him through adversity to the safety and comfort of a warm hearth.

The play is satirical to the finish, ending with a play on the "Humpty Dumpty" nursery rhyme. In this version, the egg-king has reached for the sky and cannot be pulled to earth again. More than a decade later, with the same "PM" governing Canada, Watson's gifts of prophecy are to be marvelled at.

Five of Watson's plays have not yet received mention here. Two of them, Another Bloody Page From Plutarch (1963) and Trial of Corporal Adam (1963)* are mentioned in the "Preface: On Radical Absurdity" but remain unpublished. The Canadian Fact was written in 1967 and published in White Pelican in 1972. It is a duologue in prose between a playwright and a publisher, dealing with attitudes toward Canadian plays, and dominated by Watson's satire and irreverance. White Pelican lists it as having been performed at Walterdale Theatre, directed by Peter Montgomery, in May 1967, but Walterdale has no record of it.

The Woman Taken in Adultery was written in 1979 and published in the anthology Prairie Performances in 1980. It is an effective modern-day Mystery play set in a shopping mall. This setting makes it similar to that medieval drama which originated as liturgical plays performed at the pulpit and eventually came to be performed in the street.

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* In a footnote to the afterward in Prairie Performances, editor Diane Bessai mentions Trial of Corporal Adam as having been commissioned by Coach House Theatre, Toronto, 1963. She also mentions Soul is my button as having been commissioned by Acadia Summer Playhouse, 1969.

Watson has been working on Gramsci since 1978. It is an historical play, dealing with the Italian revolutionary of the second world war, and written in number-grid poetry form.

This analysis has shown how Watson was attempting to establish a new form for the theatre, or its rightful form, by adjusting linear construction and abandoning narrative prose. In addition to these amendments to form, he was trying to expose audiences to new themes more challenging than those they were used to. Like his methods, his themes were unorthodox. The battle of elites in DIP, for example, is surely something Edmonton audiences had never confronted in a play before. The satire in Chez Vous, Comfortable Pew caused them to sit up and take notice, just as Cockrow had roused them with its shocking exposé of fictitious characters in a fictitious setting, but in a locale too close to home--a brothel in Nanaimo.

To add to the alarm, the plays seemed to contain unconnected events and no through-lines. Watson created characters who were automatons, spouting words full of ideas which whirled about an audience's head without telling a story. This flurry of words and activity, Watson hoped, would create an impression of something which cannot be seen but which is the centre of our current state of being. That state is one of multi-consciousness and multi-environment, brought about by a complex system of technological wizardry.

While the avant-garde was being tried in Edmonton, with productions of Beckett and Ionesco, Watson was the most prolific Edmonton playwright in the avant-garde genre, writing original works. But most importantly, his plays had local settings and satirized local figures. This is what made them unique. An audience could distance itself from a play by Ionesco or Beckett and treat it as a curiosity with a foreign flavour. But when a playwright used proper names, place names, and topics they recognized, they had to take notice, often to their extreme discomfort. Watson was not to be as easily dismissed as Ionesco and Beckett, because he was an Edmontonian writing about Canada and Edmonton in particular.

CHAPTER VI

Conclusion

It was Wilfred Watson whose plays captured the spirit of the decade of confrontation and agitation that was the 1960's. If his success is not in worldwide productions of his plays and publication of his work, then it is in the effect he had upon the community. Throughout the world, and particularly in North America, there was a burst of innovation and experimentation in the theatre. Watson was caught up in that creative movement and was one of the forces responsible for its appearance in Edmonton.

Watson's works were unique among the works of Edmonton writers, and among all work being done in Edmonton. In March, 1962, when Cockrow and the Gulls was done at Studio Theatre, Theatre Associates were performing The House of Bernarda Alba by Lorca. Earlier in its season, in February, Studio had produced The Visit by Frederick Dürrenmatt. This was followed by Cockrow, upon which Büchner's Leonce und Lena followed. Thus Cockrow, which was written by a professor at the University of Alberta and was about a brothel in Nanaimo, B.C., was offered to the Edmonton community along with a poetic Spanish tragedy, a black comedy written by a Swiss, and a German comedy done in German. The strong reaction from the community in response to Cockrow's negative review indicates that it did not get lost in the shuffle of world-renowned plays. As well, just prior to the production of Cockrow, in February 1962, the community was treated to two musicals. They were Kismet and Brigadoon, presented by the Civic Opera Society and the Light Opera Opera of Edmonton respectively. All this testifies to the richness of theatre in Edmonton at that time, and to the uniqueness of Cockrow when compared to these other works. Its uniqueness is measured by its Canadian content, the fact that its author lived in Edmonton, and the themes and form discussed earlier.

Similarly, when Wail for Two Pedestals opened in November of 1964, it was pitted against Eugene O'Neill's Long Day's Journey Into Night at Studio Theatre, William Gibson's Two for the Seesaw at Walterdale, and Rodger's and Hammerstein's The Sound of Music presented by the Light Opera of Edmonton. A new theatre group, the All Saints Friendship Guild which was associated with the All Saints Cathedral, presented as their first production T.S. Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral in November 1964. The only theatrical offering which might compare to Wail at Yardbird was that being presented at the same time by Theatre Upstairs. This adjunct to Studio Theatre, committed to workshop productions of new plays, was presenting Ionesco's Exit the King and Ghelderode's Three Actors and an Author. By the season's end the majority of the other theatres were presenting plays written in the same spirit as works by Watson, Ionesco, and Ghelderode. In February of 1965 Studio presented Arthur Kopit's Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mama's Hung You In The Closet and I'm Feeling So Sad, which was representative of sixties-style drama. In March 1965 Walterdale presented Ionesco's

The New Tenant and Beckett's Happy Days, productions which, as mentioned previously, met with disfavour.

The critical and public reaction against these absurdist plays would indicate that these types of plays were only acceptable at Yardbird, which was tucked away in a corner in a basement on the southside of Edmonton and had a mandate to perform avant-garde works, or at Theatre Upstairs, which intended only to provide a workshop setting for new works, and to present these works to a very small university audience. If Walterdale did not include any absurdist work in its season, Studio permitted at least one, as it too was associated with a learning institution and had a responsibility to provide experimental works for its students to learn from, and obscure works to which its audience could be exposed.

Within the Yardbird assortment of plays, Watson's works were unique among an already unique collection. In addition to Watson's plays, works by Ionesco, Pinter, and Albee were performedat Yardbird. What sets Watson's plays apart from these three is that Watson's plays are set in Canadian, and even more remarkably, Edmonton, locales. His absurdist themes and structure compare with theirs, and the rhythm of the language in his plays is as unique as the musicality of the words in The Bald Soprano or the spareness of the language in The Dumbwaiter. However, the satire in Chez Vous, Comfortable Pew is based on local situations, just as Wail alludes to certain things which are quite specifically Canadian.

In addition, Watson's plays are specifically sixties plays of the type which attempted new non-narrative forms of theatre, and which attempted to upset the status quo. The characters in Wail for Two Pedestals and Chez Vous, Comfortable Pew are members of the fifties "beat" generation, of tuning in and dropping out, and of the sixties generation of "flower children" whose slogan was "make love not war." These generations were born at the dawn of the awareness of nuclear holocaust. With world powers threatening to destroy the world gradually with an undeclared war, or suddenly with the push of a panic button, these generations condemned the state in which the Establishment had left the world. The fifties voice was raised in a cry of agony which evolved in the sixties into a scream of protest. The youth of the fifties and sixties confronted traditional values and systems, and condemned apathy and complacency. They took a reactionary stance, sometimes protesting for the sake of protesting. They were nonconformists, seeking new ways to approach the world, with a goal of greater freedom for all.

Echoing their shouts of protest were artists such as Wilfred Watson, who sought an alternative to traditional narrative forms in the theatre. Watson's was a voyage of exploration into new, unstructured types of drama. His goal was to find a form of expression best suited to the nature of the theatre. Like the act of protesting he emulated, his plays were met with scorn and shock from those he was trying to unsettle, whether it was audiences or critics. And like his cohorts, he is only able to articulate what he was trying to do, and what effect it had on him (and his work) in retrospect.

This study began with a discussion of Margaret Croyden's analysis of sixties theatre. Her comments on Happenings help to bring this work to a close. For she could well be describing Watson's work when she says:

> Disorder and disarray became a standard aesthetic criterion; the non-rational became a virtue; experience of the moment, a philosophical quest; the non-verbal response, a sign of probable truth. . . . In the theatre, happenings broke the stranglehold of narrative and of the proscenium arch, and abolished the separation between audiences and players. [1]

However, Watson's plays and the productions of them, were in some respects only an imitation of the sixties' avant-garde. His plays are representations of Happenings, in that they are mimicry without the substance and spontaneity of real Happenings. He comments on Happenings, while real Happenings commented on life. A characteristic shared by the sixties theatre discussed previously was the ensemble--actors living, working, and learning together--and their success can be attributed to this characteristic. One more reason for Watson's works differing from other sixties theatre is that he worked with different actors and director each time. The closest he came to creating the type of avant-garde theatre which evolves from ensemble work was at Yardbird, where there was a sense of ensemble, and at Studio, where there was also a close-knit working environment. Even with these endeavours, the projects were done infrequently and the creators involved with other projects (and jobs), preventing the artists from achieving the commitment, drive, and sense of ensemble of the Living Theatre, the Open Theatre, and the groups of Grotowski and Brook. In articles and interviews, Watson has never articulated a desire for his works to become collective creations. While productions of his works might have appeared to be group efforts and subject to change with every performance, they were actually scripted, zealously rehearsed and polished. They owe more to the printed word than do improvisation and collective creations. Like those other works, though, the themes and topics they deal with, and the abstract treatment of them, is peculiar to an era which questioned, and took exception to, established points of view.

Watson was a playwright in Edmonton during a time when there was a healthy climate for theatre. There was a venue for works of his kind, which even today can only be offered as an alternative to other kinds of drama. At that time, there was enough going on in Edmonton to permit an alternative type of theatre. Credit must also be given to Dr. Watson's determination and imagination, which created the plays, and to the industry of Studio Theatre and Bud D'Amur, who saw to it that there were productions of those plays.

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Chapter I

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APPENDIX

CHRONOLOGY OF PRODUCTIONS OF WATSON'S PLAYS

March 29, 1962 - Cockrow and the Gulls - Studio Theatre

Nov. 26, 1964 - Wail for Two Pedestals - Yardbird Suite

May 12, 1965 - Chez Vous, Comfortable Pew - Yardbird Suite

Oct. 13, 1965 - Tom Jones Meets Fanny Hill - Yardbird Suite

March 1967 - Thing in Black - Yardbird Suite

Dec. 4, 1967 - O holy ghost, DIP YOU FINGER IN THE BLOOD OF CANADA, and write, I LOVE YOU - Studio Theatre

March 15, 1968 - Two Teardrops Frozen on a Rearview Mirror - Walterdale Theatre (Theatre Associates)

November 21, 1969 - Let's Murder Clytemnestra According to the Principles of Marshall McLuhan - Studio Theatre

March 23, 1970 - Up Against the Wall Oedipus - SUB Theatre